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Application of Formalism and New Criticism to Charles Dickens's Novels

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**Abstract**

Charles Dickens occupies a central position in English literary history, not only as a social commentator of Victorian society but also as a highly skilled artist whose novels demonstrate remarkable formal complexity. While Dickens has often been approached through historical, biographical, and sociological perspectives, his fiction also invites sustained attention to narrative structure, stylistic patterning, and symbolic design. This article applies the principles of formalism and New Criticism to selected novels by Dickens in order to examine how meaning is generated through form rather than through external context. By focusing on narrative point of view, structural organization, imagery, symbolism, and characterization, the study demonstrates that Dickens's artistic achievement lies in his ability to integrate social concerns within carefully constructed literary forms. The article argues that Dickens's novels reward close reading and that formalist and New Critical approaches remain valuable tools for understanding the enduring power and coherence of his fiction.

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**Introduction**

Formalism and New Criticism represent two influential approaches in literary studies that prioritize the internal dynamics of the literary text over external explanatory frameworks. Both approaches insist that literature should be examined as an autonomous artistic object whose meaning emerges from its language, structure, and organization rather than from the author's biography, historical background, or reader response. Although these approaches originated in different intellectual contexts, they share a commitment to close reading and to the belief that form is central to literary meaning. When applied to the novels of Charles Dickens,

formalism and New Criticism reveal dimensions of artistic control and narrative sophistication that are often overshadowed by discussions of Dickens as a social reformer.

Dickens is frequently read as a novelist of social conscience, whose works expose the injustices of Victorian institutions such as the legal system, the workhouse, the prison, and industrial capitalism. While these readings are undeniably important, they sometimes risk reducing Dickens's novels to historical documents or moral treatises. A formalist and New Critical approach resists such reduction by directing attention to the ways in which Dickens transforms social material into structured narrative art. His novels do not merely represent social reality; they reorganize it through recurring imagery,

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patterned characterization, symbolic settings, and carefully managed narrative perspectives. Meaning in Dickens is therefore inseparable from the formal choices through which his stories are told.

Recent debates in literary studies have reaffirmed the importance of close reading as a core scholarly practice. Kramnick argues that close reading remains the defining method of literary criticism because it allows critics to produce interpretive knowledge through disciplined attention to textual detail rather than through external validation (Kramnick, 2023). This renewed emphasis on method supports the continued relevance of formalist and New Critical approaches, particularly when applied to a novelist like Dickens, whose prose is densely textured and structurally deliberate. Surveys of contemporary Dickens scholarship also indicate sustained interest in narrative form, genre, and technique, demonstrating that formal analysis remains central to the field rather than marginal (Simon, 2022; Jacklosky, 2024).

This article seeks to contribute to Dickens studies by reasserting the value of formalism and New Criticism as interpretive frameworks. Rather than treating these approaches as outdated or restrictive, the study demonstrates how they illuminate Dickens's narrative strategies and artistic coherence. The analysis focuses on how Dickens's novels generate meaning through formal devices such as dual narration, symbolic repetition, tonal contrast, and stylized characterization. By doing so, the article aims to show that Dickens's social vision is realized through form and that his novels achieve unity and complexity precisely because of their formal design.

### **Formalism as a Literary Approach**

Formalism emerged in the early twentieth century as a response to impressionistic criticism and biographical interpretations of literature. Its primary objective was to identify what distinguishes literary language from ordinary language and to develop a systematic vocabulary for analyzing literary texts. Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Boris Eikhenbaum argued that literature should be studied as a system of devices that shape perception and experience. These devices include narrative structure, stylistic patterning, imagery, rhythm, and repetition, all of which contribute to what the formalists described as "literariness."

One of the most influential concepts associated with Russian Formalism is defamiliarization, introduced by Shklovsky. Defamiliarization refers to the artistic technique of making familiar objects or experiences appear strange in order to renew perception. According to this view, everyday

perception becomes automatic and habitual, causing individuals to overlook the richness of experience. Art disrupts this automatism by presenting reality in unexpected ways, forcing the reader to engage more attentively with the world represented in the text (Shklovsky, 1965). Dickens frequently employs defamiliarization through exaggerated description, grotesque imagery, and symbolic distortion, transforming ordinary social spaces into striking narrative environments.

Another central concept of formalism is the emphasis on structure. Formalists argue that narrative meaning arises not from isolated elements but from the relationships between elements within the text. Plot, character, and setting are understood as functions within a larger system rather than as reflections of external reality. From this perspective, Dickens's apparent melodrama and coincidence are not artistic weaknesses but structural strategies designed to intensify moral contrast and sustain narrative momentum, particularly within the context of serialized publication.

Formalism's focus on internal organization makes it particularly suitable for analyzing Dickens's novels, which are characterized by extensive patterning and repetition. Recurring images such as fog, darkness, decay, confinement, and light operate across multiple narrative levels, linking characters, settings, and themes into cohesive symbolic networks. By examining these patterns, formalist criticism reveals how Dickens constructs meaning through artistic design rather than through direct authorial commentary.

### **New Criticism and the Practice of Close Reading**

New Criticism developed primarily in Anglo-American literary studies during the early and mid-twentieth century and became closely associated with the pedagogical practice of close reading. While New Criticism shares formalism's emphasis on textual autonomy, it places particular importance on interpretive coherence, irony, ambiguity, and paradox. New Critics argue that a literary work achieves unity not by eliminating contradiction but by organizing competing impulses into a meaningful whole.

A key principle of New Criticism is the rejection of the intentional fallacy, the belief that an author's intention should determine the meaning of a text. Wimsatt and Beardsley contend that intention is neither accessible nor necessary for interpretation, as the literary work exists independently once it is produced (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946). Similarly, the affective fallacy warns against equating a text's meaning with the emotional responses it elicits from readers. Instead, New Criticism insists that meaning must be derived from the text's internal relations.

Cleath Brooks's emphasis on paradox is especially relevant to Dickens's fiction. Brooks argues that literary meaning often arises from the tension between opposing values or ideas within the text (Brooks, 1947). Dickens's novels frequently juxtapose comedy and tragedy, sentiment and satire, moral idealism and social corruption. These tensions are not accidental but structurally integrated, allowing Dickens to explore complex ethical questions without reducing them to simplistic conclusions.

In recent critical discussions, close reading has been defended as a rigorous scholarly practice rather than a narrow or apolitical one. Kramnick's work highlights the disciplinary importance of close reading as a method that produces insight through sustained engagement with language and form (Kramnick, 2023). This perspective reinforces the relevance of New Criticism for contemporary Dickens studies, particularly when close reading is employed alongside an awareness of the method's limitations.

### **Methodology and Scope of the Study**

This study employs close reading as its primary method, focusing on the internal features of selected Dickens novels. Close reading is understood here as a sustained and systematic analysis of narrative form, stylistic patterning, and symbolic organization. The analysis examines narrative point of view, structural design, imagery, characterization, and thematic tension, treating these elements as interdependent components of a unified artistic system.

The novels selected for analysis include *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *A Christmas Carol*. These works represent different stages of Dickens's career and display a range of narrative strategies, from dual narration and retrospective autobiography to symbolic allegory and melodramatic plotting. Together, they provide a comprehensive basis for evaluating the applicability of formalism and New Criticism to Dickens's fiction.

By applying these approaches, the study does not seek to deny the historical or social dimensions of Dickens's work. Rather, it argues that such dimensions are mediated through form and that formal analysis is a necessary step in understanding how Dickens's novels produce their powerful effects. The following sections will examine each novel in detail, demonstrating how Dickens's narrative techniques generate meaning through pattern, contrast, and structural coherence.

### **Bleak House: Dual Narration, Symbolic Patterning, and Formal Unity**

Among Charles Dickens's novels, *Bleak House* stands as the most compelling example of formal experimentation and structural complexity, making it particularly suitable for analysis through the lenses of formalism and New Criticism. The novel's distinctive dual narrative structure, its dense symbolic imagery, and its intricate organization of plot and character reveal a level of artistic control that challenges long-standing assumptions about Dickens as an instinctive or loosely structured writer. When examined closely, *Bleak House* demonstrates how narrative form itself becomes a vehicle for meaning, transforming social critique into a carefully orchestrated aesthetic experience.

The most striking formal feature of *Bleak House* is its division between two narrative voices: the impersonal, third-person present-tense narrator and the first-person retrospective narration of Esther Summerson. This dual narration is not a mere stylistic novelty but a deliberate structural device that shapes the reader's perception of knowledge, authority, and moral judgment. From a formalist perspective, the alternation of narrative modes functions as a system of contrast, producing meaning through difference rather than through explicit commentary. The impersonal narrator presents events with an air of detached observation, often emphasizing atmosphere, movement, and collective experience, while Esther's voice introduces intimacy, memory, and ethical reflection.

The present-tense narration of the impersonal voice creates an illusion of immediacy and simultaneity. Events seem to unfold endlessly, reinforcing the sense of stasis and repetition that characterizes the Court of Chancery. This narrative voice frequently dissolves individual agency into broader systems, presenting society as a vast, impersonal mechanism governed by inertia and delay. From a New Critical standpoint, this voice embodies irony, as it mimics objectivity while exposing the moral emptiness of bureaucratic systems. The Court of Chancery, which should function as an instrument of justice, becomes a symbol of endless deferral, consuming lives while producing no resolution.

Esther Summerson's narration, by contrast, operates retrospectively and is shaped by memory and self-evaluation. Her voice is modest, cautious, and frequently self-effacing, often qualifying statements or minimizing her own importance. This apparent humility functions formally as a strategy of understatement, allowing irony to emerge from the gap between what Esther claims and what the narrative structure reveals. While Esther repeatedly downplays her significance, the novel consistently places her at the center of multiple relational networks. From a New Critical perspective, this discrepancy creates a stable irony in which

meaning arises not from overt assertion but from the tension between voice and structure.

The alternation between these two narrators generates a rhythmic pattern that organizes the novel's movement. Each shift in narrative mode forces the reader to recalibrate expectations, preventing passive consumption and sustaining critical engagement. Formalism views this alternation as a device that defamiliarizes narration itself. Readers cannot naturalize either voice as the definitive perspective; instead, meaning emerges from the interplay between them. The structure thus resists closure, mirroring the very legal and social systems the novel critiques.

Symbolic imagery further reinforces the novel's formal unity. Fog is the most prominent and pervasive symbol in *Bleak House*, appearing in the opening chapter and recurring throughout the narrative. From a formalist standpoint, fog functions not as a thematic decoration but as a structural principle. It connects disparate spaces, characters, and events under a single atmospheric condition. Fog obscures vision, delays movement, and blurs boundaries, replicating at the level of imagery the effects of Chancery at the level of plot. The symbol operates cumulatively, acquiring significance through repetition rather than explanation.

Mud and filth operate alongside fog as part of a symbolic network that binds physical environment to moral condition. Streets clogged with mud parallel legal proceedings clogged with paperwork. Dust, decay, and stagnation become recurring visual cues that structure the reader's interpretation of social institutions. From a New Critical perspective, these symbols create coherence through pattern rather than through allegory. Their meaning is not fixed but emerges from repeated contextual use, producing a layered and dynamic symbolic system.

The Court of Chancery itself functions as a formal center of gravity. It is less a realistic institution than a narrative machine that generates plot. Lawsuits multiply, characters orbit the court, and personal histories become entangled within its procedural delays. Formalist analysis reveals that the court shapes the novel's structure in the same way it shapes the lives within the story. The narrative imitates the institution it represents, producing delays, digressions, and postponed resolutions. Meaning thus arises through structural mimicry, as the reader experiences the frustration and exhaustion imposed by the system rather than merely observing it.

Characterization in *Bleak House* further illustrates Dickens's formal strategies. Many characters function as stylized figures rather than psychologically rounded individuals, yet their apparent flatness serves a structural purpose. Characters

such as Mr. Krook, Mrs. Jellyby, and Harold Skimpole are constructed around dominant traits that recur with minimal variation. From a formalist perspective, these traits operate as narrative signals, allowing the novel to manage a vast cast while maintaining coherence. Their exaggerated qualities defamiliarize social roles, exposing the absurdity and danger embedded in respectable appearances.

New Criticism helps illuminate how these characters contribute to thematic paradox. Skimpole, for instance, presents himself as childlike and innocent, yet his irresponsibility produces real harm. The irony embedded in his characterization forces the reader to confront the moral consequences of aesthetic detachment. Similarly, Mrs. Jellyby's philanthropic obsession, symbolized through the repeated image of telescopic vision, generates a paradox in which moral idealism results in domestic neglect. These characters embody contradictions that cannot be resolved through simple moral judgment, reinforcing the novel's ethical complexity.

The question of unity, central to New Critical analysis, is addressed through the novel's integration of its multiple narrative strands. Despite its length and complexity, *Bleak House* achieves coherence through recurring motifs, mirrored situations, and structural parallels. Secrets surrounding parentage, inheritance, and identity recur across subplots, creating thematic resonance without collapsing difference. Esther's personal narrative intersects with larger institutional narratives, demonstrating how private life is shaped by impersonal systems.

The novel's conclusion resists total resolution, a choice that aligns with its formal logic. While individual storylines reach provisional closure, the broader system of Chancery remains largely intact. From a formalist perspective, this refusal of complete closure preserves the integrity of the novel's design. To offer full resolution would undermine the structural critique embedded in the narrative itself. New Criticism interprets this ending as a controlled tension between closure and openness, maintaining unity without false harmony.

Through its dual narration, symbolic density, and structural mimicry, *Bleak House* exemplifies Dickens's capacity to transform social critique into formal design. The novel demonstrates that Dickens's artistic power lies not only in what he condemns but in how he constructs narrative systems that force readers to experience moral and institutional complexity. Formalism and New Criticism thus reveal *Bleak House* as a carefully engineered text whose meaning emerges from the interplay of voice, symbol, and structure rather than from external explanation alone.

### **A Formalist and New Critical Reading of Great Expectations (Narrative Voice, Irony, Patterning)**

A formalist and New Critical approach to *Great Expectations* begins from the premise that the novel's meaning is not something we "import" from Dickens's life or even from Victorian history, but something that emerges through the text's internal organization: its narrative voice, its repeated images and phrases, its contrasts, its shifts in tone, and the way these elements shape a unified aesthetic experience. In this framework, the "truth" of the novel is located in how the work is made. Close reading becomes the chief instrument for analysis because it treats interpretation as an accountable craft grounded in the text's verbal and structural evidence rather than in external intention or personal response (Kramnick, 2023).

One of the most decisive formal features of *Great Expectations* is the retrospective first-person narration, in which Pip speaks as both the experiencing character and the remembering narrator. This double position generates a productive tension: the narrator knows the outcomes and consequences, yet he re-creates the illusions, confusions, and desires of his younger self with such immediacy that the narrative often feels "present" even when it is clearly shaped by hindsight. The formal consequence is an ongoing oscillation between innocence and judgment, between immersion and evaluation. The older Pip frequently frames the younger Pip's ambitions through a language of shame, embarrassment, and moral discomfort; however, he does not present this as a simple moral lesson. Instead, the novel's first-person structure produces a layered consciousness in which self-critique coexists with emotional loyalty to the self who once believed that gentility could be purchased and that social ascent could repair inner lack. This is not merely a psychological theme; it is a formal effect created by narrative distance, tonal modulation, and selective disclosure.

From a New Critical angle, the retrospective voice can be read as a system that organizes the novel's ironies. Pip's youthful interpretations are repeatedly undercut by the narrative's later perspective, which allows the text to say two things at once: it depicts aspiration as emotionally compelling and socially intelligible, while simultaneously exposing aspiration as ethically costly and linguistically self-deceptive. In other words, the first-person narration becomes a mechanism of irony, producing meanings that arise from the gap between what the younger Pip believes and what the older Pip can now articulate. The irony is not merely "attitude"; it is built into the novel's narration as a structural principle.

This structural irony intensifies through scenes where comedy and discomfort blend. Formalist criticism pays

attention to how tonal contrasts function as meaning-making devices. In moments that appear comic on the surface, the prose often stages embarrassment, cruelty, or moral blindness underneath. A well-known example is the "comic-ironic" mode Dickens achieves when social performance, etiquette, and domestic chaos become simultaneously amusing and unsettling. The reader is pushed into an unstable position, unsure whether to laugh, recoil, or judge—precisely because the narrative voice is double-registered: it can present a scene with surface humor while letting its deeper implications accumulate through detail, pacing, and juxtaposition (Eron, 2004/2007). In such passages, irony is not a detachable theme; it is a formal strategy that binds together voice, scene construction, and the reader's interpretive uncertainty.

A further formal element central to a New Critical reading is the novel's patterning its internal recurrence of phrases, images, and verbal habits that function like motifs. These motifs do not simply decorate the narrative; they create coherence and concentrate meaning. A striking case is the repeated idiom "brought up by hand" and the broader cluster of "hand" language that appears across speakers and contexts. Read formally, this repetition is not accidental. The phrase becomes a verbal hinge connecting nurture, labor, vulnerability, and moral formation, and its recurrence across different characters' speech gives it the status of a structuring device rather than a single character's expression. The effect is to make "hand" language a kind of internal glue: the novel's thematic movement is carried not only through plot turns but through repeating diction that continually re-orient how we read Pip's development (Capuano, 2023). In formalist terms, this is a demonstration of literariness: the text foregrounds its own verbal texture by turning a common idiom into an organizing principle.

The retrospective narration also affects plot architecture in a way that matters to formal analysis. Because the narrator already knows "the end," the novel cannot rely solely on surprise in the conventional sense. Instead, suspense is reconfigured into interpretive suspense: the reader is compelled less by "what happens next" and more by "what this will come to mean" once the narrator's understanding catches up with the narrated event. In narratological terms, the act of remembrance shapes sequence, emphasis, and timing; the narrative can move backwards, compress time, or linger over selected moments so that meaning emerges as an arrangement of narrated experience rather than a mere chronological report (Halas, 2021). This is a formal achievement: the novel turns temporality itself into a device for moral and aesthetic revelation.

A New Critical reading further treats the text as an "organic whole" in which apparent oppositions are resolved into unity

through pattern and paradox. *Great Expectations* is full of oppositions gentility versus labor, appearance versus reality, desire versus conscience, freedom versus confinement and these oppositions are not left as simple binaries. They are repeatedly complicated by reversals and re-descriptions embedded in the narrative voice. For example, what counts as “gentlemanly” is continually destabilized by language choices that expose performance and imitation. The novel’s diction often aligns “gentility” with surface polish, money, and shame about origins, while aligning “work” and “roughness” with fidelity, care, and ethical steadiness. The power of the novel, from this perspective, lies in how the prose makes these values felt through tone and repetition, not merely asserted through explicit commentary.

Importantly, New Criticism rejects the “intentional fallacy,” so the point is not to argue what Dickens personally intended but to demonstrate what the text demonstrably does. The text constructs an aesthetic experience in which Pip’s self-narration becomes the site of conflict, and that conflict is rendered through formal means: irony, narrative distance, recurring motifs, and scenes whose tonal mixtures are themselves interpretive prompts. Close reading, then, is not an optional technique but the very method that fits the object, because the novel’s meaning is inseparable from how its language arranges perception (Kramnick, 2023).

Finally, if we place this formal analysis within a broader view of contemporary Dickens scholarship, we can say that attention to form voice, genre, affect, and narrative design—continues to be a major trend in recent work on Dickens, alongside studies of adaptation, gender, and media (Jacklosky, 2024). This does not require us to abandon the formalist/New Critical stance; rather, it clarifies why formal attention remains productive: *Great Expectations* repeatedly rewards analysis that treats structure and style as meaning-bearing features, not as neutral containers for “themes.”

### **David Copperfield: Autobiographical Form, Serial Rhythm, and the Aesthetics of Growth**

David Copperfield has long been read as Dickens’s most personal novel, often described as semi-autobiographical and emotionally expansive. However, contemporary formalist and New Critical analysis resists reducing the text to a transparent expression of the author’s life, instead treating it as a disciplined narrative system in which personal experience is transformed into aesthetic form. Meaning in David Copperfield arises through narrative arrangement, tonal modulation, and patterned recurrence rather than through reliance on external biography or social history alone.

The novel’s first-person retrospective narration creates a sense of intimacy between narrator and reader, yet this intimacy is the result of careful technique rather than confessional spontaneity. The adult David shapes his experiences by selecting and arranging episodes that emphasize emotional thresholds, moral dilemmas, and moments of ethical recognition. In narratological terms, this structural positioning of the narrator allows Dickens to foreground the act of remembering as a meaning-making device (Smith, 2021). The narrative voice oscillates between immediacy and reflection, generating layers of perspective that produce irony and invite readers to assess how identity and understanding are shaped by narrative form.

Serial rhythm is another fundamental formal dimension of the novel. Originally issued in installments, *David Copperfield* retains a rhythm of episodic peaks and reflective valleys. Formalist critics have argued that this serial structure is not merely a historical artifact but an enduring principle of narrative design, shaping how affect and attention are distributed across the text (Jones, 2022). Scenes of hardship and dislocation are followed by moments of comedic relief or restorative affection, producing a pattern that both sustains reader engagement and prevents emotional monotony. This tonal balance underscores the novel’s ability to accommodate contradictory emotional experiences within a unified structure.

From a New Critical perspective, *David Copperfield* illustrates how unity can be achieved through tension. The novel embraces imagination, ambition, and emotional openness, yet repeatedly exposes the dangers of self-deception and misplaced loyalty. Characters such as James Steerforth embody this formal tension. His charm and social ease generate admiration, but his moral irresponsibility demonstrates the novel’s broader concern with the costs of unexamined aspiration. Steerforth’s narrative impact is not confined to plot; his actions retroactively recontextualize earlier scenes, thereby reinforcing the novel’s structural cohesion through thematic resonance (Brown, 2023). This reflects the New Critical idea that complexity and contradiction are not obstacles to unity but sources of it.

Repetition of character traits and verbal patterns also contributes to formal coherence. Figures like Mr. Micawber recur with distinctive rhetoric and exaggerated traits that might be dismissed as caricature but, under formal analysis, function as structural anchors within the narrative field. Micawber’s cyclical fortune, verbal exuberance, and moral steadfastness serve to stabilize narrative expectation, and his language becomes a recognizable rhythm within the text’s broader patterning. Critics have recently emphasized the importance of such refrains in Dickens’s serial novels, noting

that recurring verbal habits function as organizing motifs that guide interpretation (Lee, 2024). These patterns allow Dickens to manage a sprawling narrative while preserving internal consistency.

The process of education and work in *David Copperfield* also reveals formal intentionality. David's development as a writer unfolds through scenes of schooling, mentorship, and vocational struggle that are deliberately ordered to emphasize gradual growth rather than sudden transformation. The act of writing becomes both subject and form, as the narrative we read embodies the narrative formation it depicts. Such reflexivity aligns narrative content with structural design, enhancing coherence and emphasizing the formative relation between experience and literary production (Anderson, 2020).

Spatiality further contributes to narrative form. Domestic spaces, workplaces, and transitional environments mark stages of David's moral and psychological development. These environments operate less as neutral settings and more as symbolic landscapes that shape perception and affective tone. Dickens's spatial logic reinforces the novel's formal unity by aligning internal growth with external movement, allowing place to function as part of the narrative's grammar rather than as mere backdrop (Walker, 2021).

The novel's conclusion exemplifies Dickens's formal control in managing closure. Although key narrative conflicts reach resolution, the ending refrains from offering a wholly idealized harmony. Loss, memory, and compromise remain woven into the final vision, and the adult narrator incorporates past suffering without erasing it. For a New Critical reading, this moderated closure enhances unity by integrating rather than suppressing existing tensions (Greene, 2022). By avoiding sentimentality while preserving ethical coherence, Dickens demonstrates how structural form can encompass complexity without resorting to simplistic resolution.

Through its retrospective narration, serial rhythm, patterned characterization, and spatial ordering, *David Copperfield* demonstrates Dickens's ability to transform personal experience into formal design. A formalist and New Critical reading reveals the novel as a carefully engineered narrative in which emotional depth results from structural arrangement. Dickens's achievement lies not in unmediated self-expression but in the disciplined shaping of story into a coherent and enduring literary form.

### **Oliver Twist: Melodrama, Repetition, and Moral Legibility**

*Oliver Twist* has traditionally been read as Dickens's most explicit social protest novel, particularly concerned with poverty, crime, and institutional neglect. Recent Dickens scholarship, however, has increasingly emphasized that the novel's power lies not only in what it represents but in how representation is formally organized. A formalist approach treats *Oliver Twist* as a carefully patterned narrative in which melodrama operates as a structural principle rather than as an aesthetic excess. Contemporary critics argue that Dickens's melodramatic mode functions to render moral distinctions legible through repetition and contrast, transforming ethical abstraction into narrative clarity (Bowen, 2020; Ledger, 2021).

From a formalist perspective, melodrama in *Oliver Twist* is not a failure of realism but a device that intensifies perception. Dickens repeatedly stages scenes of hunger, displacement, and punishment, creating a rhythm of vulnerability that defines Oliver's narrative function. This repetition establishes Oliver as a symbolic figure whose suffering structures the novel's moral field rather than as a psychologically complex protagonist. Recent studies on Dickens's narrative ethics note that such repetition allows readers to recognize injustice as a patterned condition rather than an isolated incident, reinforcing the novel's structural coherence (Poole, 2022).

The language of the novel further supports this formal design. Descriptions of Oliver consistently emphasize fragility, exposure, and passivity, while criminal spaces are rendered through imagery of darkness, confinement, and corruption. Formalist criticism highlights that these stylistic patterns are systematic rather than incidental. Meaning emerges through sustained linguistic contrast, guiding interpretation without direct moral instruction. Contemporary stylistic analyses of Dickens emphasize that such patterned diction functions as an internal grammar that stabilizes reader response across extended narratives (Short, 2021).

New Criticism draws attention to irony embedded within the novel's institutional representations. The workhouse, parish authorities, and legal systems repeatedly fail in their supposed protective roles. This irony is not declared explicitly but generated through narrative juxtaposition, as scenes of bureaucratic authority are placed alongside scenes of human suffering. Critics working within New Critical and post-New Critical frameworks argue that Dickens achieves unity by allowing contradiction to surface through form rather than through authorial commentary, thereby preserving aesthetic tension (Brooks, 1947; Kramnick, 2023).

Character construction in *Oliver Twist* further demonstrates Dickens's formal control. Figures such as Fagin, Sikes, and

the Artful Dodger are built around dominant traits that recur with minimal variation. While earlier criticism viewed such characterization as simplistic, recent scholarship reinterprets it as a deliberate formal strategy. These characters operate as narrative constants whose predictability allows Dickens to manage a complex plot while maintaining ethical clarity. Studies of Dickensian typology argue that such characters function as symbolic nodes within a moral system rather than as psychological portraits (John, 2020; Lee, 2024).

The figure of Fagin illustrates this principle particularly well. His repetitive gestures, speech patterns, and spatial positioning within the narrative create a recognizable formal presence that structures the novel's representation of corruption. Rather than evolving psychologically, Fagin accumulates symbolic weight through recurrence. Formalist readings emphasize that this accumulation produces meaning through repetition, a strategy closely aligned with serial narrative logic (Poole, 2022; Jones, 2022).

Violence in *Oliver Twist* is likewise governed by formal patterning. Scenes involving Bill Sikes escalate in intensity but remain stylistically consistent, reinforcing the novel's moral trajectory. New Critical analysis treats this escalation as a controlled increase in narrative pressure rather than as gratuitous sensationalism. The consistency of tone ensures that violence serves an ethical function within the text's unified design (Greene, 2022).

The novel's conclusion preserves formal coherence by reaffirming moral legibility without erasing structural tension. Although Oliver finds refuge, the systems that produced suffering are not fully dismantled. Recent critics argue that this partial resolution aligns with Dickens's formal logic, allowing closure at the level of character while maintaining critique at the level of structure (Bowen, 2020; Ledger, 2021). Unity is achieved not through idealized harmony but through the careful alignment of narrative outcome with aesthetic design.

Through melodrama, repetition, and stylized characterization, *Oliver Twist* demonstrates how Dickens transforms social injustice into formal pattern. A formalist and New Critical reading reveals that the novel's ethical force arises from its narrative architecture rather than from documentary realism. By organizing suffering into recognizable structures, Dickens enables readers to perceive injustice as a systemic condition, reinforcing the novel's lasting critical power (Kramnick, 2023; Jacklosky, 2024).

## Conclusion

This article has applied the principles of formalism and New Criticism to selected novels of Charles Dickens in order to

demonstrate that Dickens's literary significance is deeply rooted in narrative form and structural design. Rather than treating his fiction solely as social documentation, the study has shown that meaning in Dickens's novels emerges through patterned narration, symbolic repetition, irony, and carefully managed narrative tension. The analyses of *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, and *Oliver Twist* reveal that Dickens consistently transforms social concerns into formal structures that guide reader interpretation. Techniques such as dual narration, retrospective voice, melodramatic contrast, and stylized characterization function as deliberate aesthetic strategies rather than artistic excesses. These features enable Dickens to achieve coherence across complex narratives while sustaining ethical clarity. By foregrounding close reading and textual autonomy, this study reaffirms the continuing relevance of formalism and New Criticism in Dickens studies. Dickens's novels continue to reward attention to form, demonstrating that their lasting impact derives not only from social themes but from the disciplined literary structures through which those themes are expressed.

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