The New Poor Law of 1834

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, nicknamed the ‘New’ Poor Law, established the workhouse organization. Before this law, resources such as parish poorhouses and almshouses were available to starving families and those living on the streets. These places provided food, clothing, blankets, and even occasional cash to those in need of it. However, with the ‘New’ Poor Law, these establishments were closed down, and in its place was the workhouse. The workhouse was a system of intense, back-breaking labor of the poor in exchange for meagre food and shelter. To labor in the workhouse, the poor had to live there. This rule was highly distressing to the poor because it forced families to abandon many of their belongings, their homes, and even each other as the workhouses separated people by age and gender.

Dickens himself never lived in a workhouse, but it was discovered after his death, that his family had been imprisoned in a debtors’ prison. As restricting and miserable as a debtors’ prison was, Dickens believed it was superior to the conditions of a workhouse. At least in the debtors’ prison, young Dickens and his family could stay together.

Although he didn’t experience living in a workhouse, Dickens was a reporter for a time during the Poor Law. As such, he witnessed the hardships brought upon by the workhouse. He was a witness to young children being separated from their families and forced to perform extensive labor beyond their years. He got a sense of what it meant for poor people to be desperate, blamed, starving, and mistreated. Additionally, Dickens observed how these workhouses were run by heartless men who didn’t care about the inhumane conditions of their workhouse or the suffering of their laborers.

One of these figures of the “heartless men” shows up in *Oliver Twist* as the man in the white waistcoat. This character represents the arrogant, uncaring officials of the workhouses who were prejudiced against the poor. During this time, they thought of the poor as lowly beggars who were to blame for their circumstances. This hypocritical idea is shown multiple times in *Oliver Twist* as the higher-ups preach to the poor to change their ways, yet don’t provide them with a sufficient way to do so.

One character that portrays this self-righteousness of the higher-up is Mr. Bumble. Mr. Bumble takes great pride in hurting and abusing the children of the workhouse. With Oliver, specifically, Mr. Bumble never believes Oliver is telling the truth and believes Oliver is an inherently bad child. If people like Mr. Bumble believe that children like Oliver are fundamentally evil, how do they expect children and the poor to better themselves as they often preach them to do?

To sum up, as we examine the ‘New’ Poor Law and Dickens’ own observations of the act, we’re able to see the hypocrisy and prejudice of the upper and middle classes towards the poor and why Dickens was so passionate about this subject. Officials like Mr. Bumble preach Christian morality, and yet, are merciless towards the workhouse laborers. This was one of the main points that Dickens gets across to readers of his novel. He highlights the institutional cruelty of the workhouse officials through satirizing characters like Mr. Bumble to show how the Poor Act was highly detrimental to people of the lower class while drawing from his own experiences as a child and reporter to make his novel personal.


Check if you understood the text:

1. What changed for poor people with the 1834 law?
2. Why was it horrible to go and live in the workhouse?
3. Who ran these workhouses?
4. What did these people think of poor people?
5. What did Dickens want to denounce with many of his novels?