

Narrative Ethics in Dickens' Novels

Jiang Jindi

Liu Qian

Foreign Language College, Shandong University of Technology, China

*Dickens' novels have always focused on social issues, involving the contradictions of different social classes. His novel narrative always follows the western tradition, emphasizing that the subject matter of a novel must come from social life and reflect social morality and social significance. In the creation stage, Dickens always adheres to the main line of ethical tradition. From the perspective of literary ethics, his novel can be regarded as the most direct expression of the interaction and exchange of ethical concepts during the Victoria age. This paper aims to give a clear explanation of the ethical traditions of that period through the analysis of his early work *Oliver Twist*, mid-term work *David Copperfield*, and later work *Great Expectations*. Not only do Dickens's novels reveal the lack of ethics and morality brought about by the rapid development of capitalist industrialization, but also show the evolution of the ethical and moral traditions of British society and his ethical concern for the social state.*

Keywords: Charles Dickens, narrative, ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

A unique ethical tradition formed in the Victorian era. With the development of this kind of moral tradition, it gained more and more supporters, but for those who are sensitive, it was stifling and intolerable. Ethical choice is made by a person when facing a major event in life. To some degree, literature was originally created for ethical and moral purposes. Charles Dickens realized the social ills and gave full expression to the ethical tradition at that time in his novels. The ethical environment in his novels is highly realistic, the ethical choices of his characters reflect the complexity of the ethical ideas during the Victorian era, and the theme of "praising virtue" is mainly expressed through the plot of "punishing vice". Because of the edification and inspiration of his novel, readers and audiences of different nationalities resonate strongly in different eras.

For more than a century, scholars all over the world have been committed to studying Charles Dickens' works and have presented a lot of far-reaching arguments. From the perspective of research theory, there are mainly realistic criticism, biographical criticism, criticism of formalism, psychological criticism,

Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, new criticism, structuralist criticism, phenomenological consciousness criticism, and social and historical criticism, etc. From a research perspective, scholars mainly study from the aspects of creative idea, creative art, comparison of works and communication via translation. However, the literary criticism of Dickens' works is a zigzag journey, because both the subject and methodology are constantly changing. In terms of traditional ethics, most of the studies on Dickens' works start from the perspective of society, education, family, justice, and gender, etc., and there is no systematic literary research focusing on the changing process of traditional ethics. This paper systematically sorts out the traditional ethics during the whole creation period of Dickens, with an aim to make a helpful reference for academic circles to fully understand traditional ethics.

II. NARRATIVE ETHIC

Narrative, it might also be said, is that which produces a particular identity or meaning through the singular arrangement of a temporal and spatial series of incidents, figures, motifs and characters (Wolfreys 163). It is American scholar W. C. Booth who first links "narrative" to "ethics". He holds that "once a new text is made public, readers intend to read the text with our common sense, which may bring two responsibilities for readers, that is, readers are not only responsible for the text and the author, but also for the ethical qualities of his or her reading" (10). What Booth concerns is actually the ethical exchange between the author and the reader formed during the narrative process. Later, Adam Zachary Newton adopted this view and proposed the concept of "narrative ethics" by combining "narrative" with "ethics". He pointed out that narrative ethics is attributed to the various ethical orientations of narrative discourse on the one hand, and refers to a way that the ethical discourse relies on the narrative structure on the other hand. In other words, narrative ethics does not only refer to a series of superior theoretical ideas or transcendental ethical standards, but the style or manner of writing and attitudes of the author in specific texts, that is, the ethical relationship between the narrator, the reader or the audience and the author formed during the narrative process. Newton prefers to focus on the narrative ethics rather than the ethics beyond the text.

Professor Liu Xiaofeng divides ethics into rational ethics and narrative ethics in his *Heavy Body – Narrative and Modern Ethics*. He holds that narrative ethics is neither a general law that explores vital sensibilities and a basic moral concept that human should follow, nor making a rule for vital sensibilities. It is to show vital sensibilities by narrating touching life experience, and create specific moral consciousness and ethical appeals (8). His view of narrative ethics has something in common with Professor Nie Zhenzhao's elucidation of ethical literary criticism, while Nie Zhenzhao further emphasizes the moral particularity, that is, to realize the objectivity of ethical literary criticism, we must base ourselves on the background when the work is created (4-8). However, the emphasis on moral

particularity does not mean canceling moral evaluation; instead, we should suspend the judgment of the good and evil and carry out moral evaluation from a historical perspective. Professor Wu Maoguo holds that narrative ethics refer to how narrative process, narrative skills and narrative forms show ethical implication, and the interaction between the author and the reader, or the author and the narrator, or the ethical awareness and ethical narration of the novel. Therefore, he prefers to discuss narrative ethics from the perspective of narratology.

As a methodology, ethical literary criticism emphasizes the social responsibility of literature and literary criticism, and highlights the teaching function of literature, and from those ethical choices we can obtain edification and warnings. The Victorian literary works, both in terms of creation and criticism, are generally focused on the moralization function. In other words, they are beneficial to the people. Dickens highlights the importance of ethics while promoting the artistry of novels. Not only are his novels full of courage and justice to expose social evils, but also full of responsibility to rebuild social morality.

The ethics ideology of Dickens's novels lies in that it touches the most essential issues of capitalist society, exposing the evil of the upper class to the readers in a spicy manner. Therefore, the disclosure of hidden social contradictions, the revelation of moral decay of capitalist society, and the criticism of social stereotypes are the distinctive features of Dickens' novel. That's why his novels are most popular in the UK. Dickens holds that the primary task of novel is to reflect the social problems, and that the root of all social problems is the moral decay of people. As a member of the moderate reformists, Dickens believes that ethics can effectively resolve social conflicts. On this score, Dickens' novels are the most direct expression of the interaction between Victorian literature and moral concepts at the same period.

The social problem drama is the most important representative of his early creations, such as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, which reveal the living conditions and problems of the slums in London, and *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*, which show predicament of the "Angel in the family" of the bourgeois society in their daily life and marriage. His later works *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend* reveal social evils such as money worship in a more critical way. Through the disclosure of various social problems, Dickens expresses his deep concern about the ethical issues of British society at that time. He insists that fiction is a tool for moral education and ethical advocacy, and its main function is to lash out social evils. Also, he holds that the subject matter of a novel must come from social life and reflect social morality and social significance. His innovation in writing techniques and concern for social issues, social awareness, and political awareness have greatly promoted the development and prosperity of British novels in the 20th century. He always believes that a novel must carry important social missions. Therefore, when writing the real life themed novels of Victorian era, the author should clarify its social significance and maximize the role of enlightenment and inspiration in the collision of ethical communication.

In summary, this paper attempts to combine narration with ethics in the study of moral and ethics, to explore the traditional ethics reflected in the narration strategies, narrative forms and narrative process of his novels. Dickens based himself on the Victorian era, and conducted a dialogue between ethical awareness and ethical appeals through novels from an ethical standpoint.

III. NARRATIVE ETHICS IN DICKENS' THREE PERIODS OF WRITING

During the three periods of his novel creation, Dickens paid close attention to and reflected on the traditional ethics of British society insightfully, constituting a clear clue and basic content of his novel. Therefore, it is necessary for us to re-examine and reinterpret the traditional ethics in his novels from the perspective of novel narration, in a bid to help his classic "gain a new life" in nowadays.

At the initial stage, Dickens mainly focused on the exploration of traditional social ethics, and wrote a series of representative works, such as *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Social issues were undoubtedly the main theme of his novels during this period, and his concern for social issues opened the door for him to understand the real society. The style of Dickens' early novels is magnificent, popular, smooth, humorous, pungent and sentimental, in which, the revelation and criticism of social is generally limited to local system and field, mainly showing the customs of the London urban and rural areas and scenery, the love and hate to life and the immature and blind optimism about ethics.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens describes the hard life of the lower class people in the artificial prosperous in the Capitalism society. He shows great sympathy to the poor and meanwhile reveals and animadverts the dark corruption of the hypocrisy and unreasonable phenomenon. In this novel, Oliver was an orphan who grew up in an inhumane almshouse. However, no matter what happened, he was always kind to others, and eventually lived a happy life. For example, Oliver went to the prison to visit Fagin who would be hanged, facing the wicked who has attempted to instigate Oliver into his crime and made multiple designs against him, Oliver was never full of hatred and also never pleasant in the mind for the successful revenge. On the contrary from the bottom of his heart, he expressed his gratitude to Fagin's care and prayed for him sincerely. Little Oliver, tears streaming down his face, knelt down to the ground and prayed, saying: "Oh, God forgive this wretched man!" cried the boy with a burst of tears (*Oliver Twist*, 634). This scene showed fully Oliver's beautiful heart full of tolerance and love.

Dickens' early novels show the difficult life of the lower classes that live in the dilapidated slums, and reveal that the money-oriented value is a distortion of human nature by the capitalist system. Through a nearly perfect figure he depicted the bourgeoisie, Dickens was still with fantasy on the dominance of the bourgeoisie and looked forward to believing one day the evil bourgeoisie would find his crime with conscience. The creative ideas formed in this period basically

laid a foundation for his creation in the middle and late stages, i.e., feeling sympathy for the lower classes from the standpoint of the middle class, and expecting to influence them with morality and ethics.

During the middle stage, Dickens made profound reflection and exploration of the traditional ethics and abandoned the blind optimism at the initial stage. If Dickens' early works are to express his concern for issues such as British social ethics through social problem dramas, then after entering the middle stage, his concern for these issues becomes deeper and deeper, covering multiple aspects of traditional ethics, such as ethical identity, ethical environment, etc. The class identity problems in Victorian society are shown in his most works of this period, as well as close relations between class identity and social environment in the traditional ethics. Dickens showed a deeper understanding of the traditional ethics in his novel of this period, not only changing the blind optimism at the initial stage, but also directly exposing and criticizing the dark side of the traditional ethics.

In his well-known novels of middle period such as *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Little Dorrit*, he exposed the dark side of social ethics and criticized the cruelty of the real world. In the autobiographical novel *David Copeprfield*, Dickens exposed the hypocrisy and greed of the upper class, and deeply criticized their money worship: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into his companionship; compared these henceforth everyday associates with those of my happier childhood — not to say with Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of those boys; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom" (*David Copperfield*, 166). At the same time, he represented the influence of moral deficiencies. *David Copperfield* shows that all the characters, rich or poor, cannot get away from the capitalist society. Dickens' original optimism about capitalist society was greatly shaken. This shock stung him into writing *David Copperfield*. It is worth noticing that the good characters in the novel are forced to face difficulties, disappointment, trial and affliction, and to suffer most cruelly, while the bad characters do not suffer so much.

By showing the life of the leading characters of the novel, Dickens showed the readers the hypocrisy of the upper class under the capitalist system, and his expectations for the return of the human's good nature and traditional ethics. Dickens showed a broader picture of Britain in 19th century, in order to expose the decadent judicial system and the education system stifling children's mind, condemn the selfish hypocritical despicable villain, besides he had much sympathy for low class people. The main feature of Dickens' novel during this period is the creation of typical figures of all classes, which can be attributed to his close attention to the traditional ethics in the real society.

Dickens' novels at the late stage construct the ideal of traditional ethics. During this period, he continued to focus on the exploration of traditional ethics and made deeper reflections. John pointed out that Dickens effectively determined the shape both professional and aesthetic expectations of the writer and reader in the

production and reception of his work. As a result, he wrote many well-known novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Common Friend*, and scored remarkable achievements. After experiencing the confusion of Victorian social ethics during the middle period, Dickens' creation in this period is becoming increasingly mature, and involves all aspects of social life.

Georg Lukcas claims that literature should not only reflect the world but also have to distort reality in order to represent the truth about society. The *Great Expectations* features with realistic and thrilling plot and vivid character portrayal, through which the true, the good and the beautiful are showed, drawing a sharp contrast with the real society and leaving readers a huge imagination space and a deep sense of morality. At the end of the story, Pip eventually realizes who the most important person in his life is. Pip misses Joe: "While all things changed, this one consistent feature did not change. Pip realized whoever came about him, still steeled down into Joe. He opened his eyes in the night; saw in the great chair at the bedside, Joe. He opened his eyes in the day, and sitting on the window-seat, smoking his pipe in the shaded open window, still he saw Joe" (*Great Expectations*, 461). It is to be noted that Dickens explored the dark side of the society in his novels. During this period Dickens had deeper and more realistic understanding of bourgeois, but he considered ethics is the only way to solve social ills.

Dickens pointed out that the negative nature of being a gentleman has constituted a major contradiction in Victorian society. The so-called gentleman ethics then has been extremely destructive. Gilmer claimed that it was exclusive, anti-intellectual, and anti-democratic, while advocating decent and formality to a larger degree than talent, energy and imagination. Although such kind of deep-rooted values were no longer what the British society needed. The Through meticulous observations and exquisite narrative techniques, Dickens presented the readers with an era of contradictions, conflicts and hypocrisy. His novels of this period attract more attention from the public, because they are created based on the unique political background, and they are not only a comprehensive representation of his artistry, but also a concrete manifestation of ethics.

Professor Zhao Yanqiu once pointed out that the criticism of social evils, the promotion of morality, and the exploration of human nature form the main body of Dickens's novels and constitute the three basic aspects of them. Generally, Dickens' novel creation can be divided into three stages. Although different stage has different focus, and presents different artistic and ideological characteristics, he always concerns social issues and adheres to the main line of traditional ethics in his novel creation. During these periods, Dickens paid close attention to and reflected on the traditional ethics of British society insightfully, constituting a clear clue and basic content of his novel.

IV. CONCLUSION

From a historical standpoint of the development of human civilization, literature is only a part of human history. It cannot transcend history or be separated from history, but can only be part of it. As we know, Literature in different historical periods has its own attributes, ethical environment and ethical context. Therefore, to well understand literature, we must base on its ethical environment and ethical context. In the Victorian era when a unique ethical tradition formed, Dickens' literary works provided a way to know, read, analyze and interpret Victorian social literature from an ethical perspective. In the early days, Dickens mainly focused on showing the moralization function of ethics; in the middle period, he mainly portrayed the changes in ethical relations and social order, as well as various problems and results arising therefrom, which provided experience and lessons for the progress of human civilization; in the later stage, he dug deeper into the ethical relations, explored the profound ethical connotation contained in it, and revealed the root of social tragedy by analyzing the predicament of the leading character due to his/her ethical identity. In a word, Dickens' novels point out social evils in a critical way, and more comprehensively criticize the Victorian traditional ethics.

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About the Authors



Asian Literature.

Jiang Jindi is currently a Lecturer in the Foreign Language College of Shandong University of Technology, China. She obtained her Master in English Language and Literature degree at The University of Suwon, South Korea and her Ph.D. in English Language and Literature in Kangwon National University, South Korea. Her research interests include British, American and



Liu Qian is currently an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Shandong University of Technology, China. She received her Master's degree in Applied Linguistics at Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, China. Her research interests include British and American Literature as well as business English.