

Analysis on the Reality of *Oliver Twist* From the Perspective of Sociohistorical Criticism

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Abstract

Oliver Twist, a realistic novel produced by Dickens in his early time, has received lots of affection since it came out. This novel also maintains its popularity since it has been adapted into various versions of film and drama. The setting of the work was in Victorian London, a rapidly developing period with many social ills. To figure out the connection between literary creation and the work's social background, the paper aims at analyzing *Oliver Twist*'s reality from the perspective of sociohistorical criticism which is always used in analyzing realistic works and still of great influence in today's criticism. The paper pays much attention to make an analysis on the reality of the novel's background and characters.

Key words: *Oliver Twist*; Sociohistorical Criticism; Reality; Victorian London

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INTRODUCTION

Sociohistorical criticism is a kind of critic approach used to evaluate literary creation considering the social, cultural and historical influence. (Li, 2006) It has always maintained its vitality, for what it deals with are aesthetic practices in a certain social, cultural and historical period. Sociohistorical criticism focuses on social, cultural and historical influences to literary creation. (Li, 2006)

Dickens, a celebrated English realist writer, together with French writers Balzac and Stendhal, held up the banner of realism in 19th century. (Zhang, 2016) In his early work, *Oliver Twist*, which is still popular around the world, he concentrated on the lower class in Victorian London. His own real experiences as a child labour working in harsh conditions helped him successfully portray those lively characters in *Oliver Twist*. As a realistic novel aiming at reflecting the times, the reality of *Oliver Twist* is of great significance.

Recognition of the importance of the reality in *Oliver Twist* has led to the analysis on the reality of *Oliver Twist* from the perspective of sociohistorical criticism. The analysis would not only make it possible for the readers to get a better understanding of the realistic features in *Oliver Twist* by clearly analyzing the reality of the novel's background and characters, but also help to clarify the connection between this novel and the social setting, thus exposing social problems.

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR AND *OLIVER TWIST*

Romanticism and the subsequent Realism contribute to the prosperity of European literature in 19th century. (Zhang, 2016) Dickens, as a famous British realist writer, together with French authors Balzac and Stendhal, held up the flag of realism. *Oliver Twist*, as his early work which still has great influence today, reflects the realistic features in Dicken's writing. (Zhang, 2016) In this part, the paper introduces the author as well as *Oliver Twist* and its background in order to get some basic knowledge about Dickens and his work *Oliver Twist*.

1.1 An Introduction to the Author

Dickens, who wrote *Oliver Twist*, was born in a family of Navy clerks. When he was only 12, all his family members went into prison because of unpaid debts. As a

result, he was forced to work as a minor in the workshop. It was precisely because he had deeply experienced the life of the poor, which left an everlasting aching brand on his mind that he succeeded in portraying those lively characters in *Oliver Twist*.

He not only absorbed from his own life experiences, but also learned from the real society since many of his works are reflections of real society. His works have always shown the humanitarian spirit of punishing evil and promoting good. Dickens paid lots of his energy in exposing the social ills. He showed great empathy and love for the poor people and exposed those injustices, hypocrisy, corruption in the capitalist society. For example, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens expressed his sympathy and sent good wishes to the toiling masses while criticizing the gainful bourgeoisie. Besides, many unforgettable characters and masterpieces produced by him still impress readers a lot, including *A Tale of Two Cities*, which has maintained its appeal among readers.

Dickens' life-long activities and creations were always in step with the trend of the times. In his period, Britain was in a dramatical change. During this time, the industrial revolution was advancing at a rapid pace, and the difference in living standards between the upper class and the lower class became starker, causing various problems. The Charter Movement in England at that time also had a great influence on Dickens, which made his works greatly reflect the poor in that era.

1.2 An Introduction to *Oliver Twist* and Its Background

In *Oliver Twist*, The author used his irony and cold humor writing style to share with the readers how a little poor orphan was grown up in Victorian London and reflect the plight of the poor at the lower class at that age.

At the beginning of this novel, Oliver Twist appeared as a baby. An unknown young pregnant woman fainted in the street and was taken to the home for the poor. The next day, she gave birth to a baby and then passed away. The little baby was Oliver Twist, the protagonist of the novel. The little baby grew up under workhouse's cruel conditions. Then he worked as an apprentice to the tyrant Bumble who was the parish beadle. The life there was rather unhappy, so he fled to the big city in his mind—London, where he came across a group of city pickpockets and was compelled to be a thief. Fortunately, he was temporarily rescued and adopted by kindhearted Mr. Brownlow, but was kidnaped by the gang and forced back to be a thief again. In order to rescue Oliver, Nancy, a female thief, ignored the threats of the thieves' leader and reported to Brownlow that Oliver was the child he had been looking for, the son of his died friend. At the end of the novel, Nancy was murdered by Sikes, a bad guy and thief. Oliver found salvation, living with his loved ones in the end.

Oliver Twist was written during the Victorian era which

is around the 1830s. At this time, the Industrial Revolution was advancing at a top speed. As the difference in living standards between well-to-do people and the lower orders became starker, the industrial bourgeoisie and the proletariat emerged as well as lots of social ills. For example, a large number of bourgeoisie became rich, while the proletariat became poorer and poorer due to the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, environmental pollution was also a serious problem. From Dickens' realistic description, it is possible for the readers to know something about the social ills at that specific time.

2. SOCIOHISTORICAL CRITICISM

Sociohistorical criticism has a long history, which dates back to 770 BC in China and 800 BC in the West. (Li, 2006) Considering various Chinese and Western methods of literary criticism, sociohistorical criticism still has always maintained a strong vitality. (Li, 2006) The paper makes a brief introduction about sociohistorical criticism as well as the reality element of the theory of sociohistorical criticism.

2.1 Overview of Sociohistorical Criticism

Sociohistorical criticism is a kind of critic approach used to evaluate literary creation, considering the social, cultural and historical influence. (Li, 2006) Whether in China or in western countries, sociohistorical criticism is almost accompanied by the whole development process of criticism to literary. (Li, 2006) In the 18th century, Italian philosophy Vico in his book *The First New Science* mentioned that no one can get the real meaning of *Homer's Epics* and Homer without studying the social environment of ancient Greek, thus creating a critical method of combining literary works with the writer's life and the background of the times. (Zhu, 12) Sociohistorical criticism was established in the mid-nineteenth century when French critic Taine clearly observed in the preface of his work *History of English Literature and Philosophy of Art* that all human creative activities are dominated by three factors: race, environment and times, thus one should look for the ultimate source of creative activities among these factors. (Zhu, 12) China's sociohistorical criticism with modern significance began to appear after modern times with Mao Dun as the most important representative.

In short, sociohistorical criticism holds that literature is socially, culturally and historically influenced. It is of great necessity to take both literary works, social setting and historical development into consideration.

2.2 The Reality Element of Sociohistorical Criticism

Sociohistorical criticism discusses the connection between literary creation and social background to make judgment

on the works, thus creating three judgement standards: reality, tendency and social impacts. (Zhu, 12) The paper emphasizes the analysis on the reality. To make sure whether or not the works reflect the society in a specific period, reality can't be ignored in the evaluation of literary works. The reality is embodied in the following three points: reality of the background, characters and details. The paper focuses to analyze the reality of setting and characters in *Oliver Twist*.

Background means a set of surroundings, which refers to the place and time where and when literary works takes place as well as some specific features of that age and location. Literary works are rooted in the soil of the times, and there must exist some connections between the two. To identify the reality of the work's background, it is important to figure out whether the work reflects the progressive trend of the times or not.

3. REALITY OF BACKGROUND IN *OLIVER TWIST*

Literary creation is created during a specific period, thus can't be separated from society, culture and history. So, to some extent, literary works can reflect certain background which not only include the social ideology but include the specific characteristics of the times, such as environmental values etc. Based on the sociohistorical criticism, the progressive trend of the times reflected by literary creation can prove the reality of the literary creation's setting. In this part, the paper aims at discussing the reality of social and environmental backgrounds in *Oliver Twist*, to figure out if they reflect the age's progress.

3.1 Reality of the Social Background

Dickens set his work *Oliver Twist* in lower class. From Oliver's birthplace to London, Dickens applying the third perspective recorded the growth story of Oliver, and described the lives of the people at the bottom at the same time. With his vivid description about the social background, Dickens successfully reflected some problems of England society in his novel. For example, by comparing the poor kids' insufficient food with officials' delicate feast in the workhouse, Dickens strongly revealed the greed of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, Dickens also showed the readers some unjust phenomena in that society through a record of the social background by means of the character's words. For example, the repetition of the hanging in character's words implies the oppression to the poor in that era.

3.1.1 The Poverty and The New Poor Law

Oliver Twist, set in Victorian London, contains various description about social problems during this era, among which the description about the great difference between well-to-do people and the underclass is impressive. Though Glorious Revolution and industrial revolution

contributed to the politic reformation and economic boom at that age, the difference in living standards between well-to-do people and the lower orders became starker, as factory owners were enjoying life while the unemployed workers were starving. It was clear that the poverty of the bottom people is a serious problem in Britain. Dickens also noticed this problem for there were many descriptions about the poor living conditions of the people at the bottom in this novel. In chapter five, Oliver followed Mr. Sowerberry to a funeral, where he saw a family of five in a filthy room with dirty water running on the floor and no medical care for their sickness. Besides, Oliver's miserable life in the workhouse was also portrayed in great detail in the novel. The following is a typical example.

"The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon." (*Oliver Twist*, chapter two)

It seems unbelievable to the readers. But this was exactly what was allowed by *The New Poor Law*, made part of the system of laws in the year of 1834, stated that people could only be given food aid if they entered a "Poor House" which was actually a "workhouse" with heavy work, poor pay, poor food and overcrowded accommodation where people were separated by age and sex, which resulted in the families of the poor being separated from each other. No one was allowed to go out without written permission from the overseer. Without heavy labor, it was impossible for the poor to gain aid. In order to discourage them from being dependent upon the so-called government's aid, the poor were forced to endure unbearable suffering. Because of the notoriety of workhouse, large amounts of poor people in need would starve to death or join a gang of thieves instead of working in the workhouse. Actually, without giving what the poor need, the law had ignored the urgency to settle down the serious social problem of poverty thus dragged the poor deeper into the worse abyss. By describing Oliver's life experience in the workhouse, Dickens tried to reveal such a serious social problem thus urging the public to seek solution.

3.1.2 The Hanging

The hanging appears many times in the novel. As a kind of heavy punishment at that time, the one who used it always held an attitude of disgust towards the object and its appearance also implied some social values at that time in the novel. For example, when Noah, an underage worker in the undertaker's shop, insulting Oliver's mother that an impure woman would be put into prison for hard labor or exiled even the worst, be hanged. The hanging was connected with impure people showing the society's discrimination against impure women. The author also ended thief Sikes with a hanging when Sikes was

accidentally hanged by the loop made by himself, which showed people's hatred towards thieves at that time. The hatred towards thieves can also be proved from the application of the law at the beginning of the 19th century in England, the content of which is if the value of property stolen exceeded one shilling, the one would be hanged.

These above examples show the readers some social values at that time, and it can also be used to reveal social ills that the writer intended to expose. For example, in chapter two, when Oliver wanted an extra bowl of porridge, the official in the workhouse swore that Oliver would be hanged sooner or later. Such a sensible request was treated as a crime by the officials in the workhouse. It seemed that what the officials wanted was to spend less on the poor, and earn as much as possible for themselves, regarding the poor as machines and ruling them to create more wealth. Just like the invisible hanging, harsh conditions and inhuman rules gradually tightened the poor to the gallows and then pulled the poor into death instantly. The hanging was used by the author to expose the physical and spiritual oppression imposed by the greedy and ruthless bourgeoisie to the poor, thus made it possible for public to notice the hidden social ills.

3.2 Reality of the Environmental Background

With the development of the society, environment becomes the center of people's concern. The environment description in the literary work would reflect the environmental conditions of the specific time.

Oliver Twist was set in Victorian London. At that time, the Industrial Revolution was advancing at a top speed, and large quantities of coal was being used to keep these machines running day and night. At the same time, kinds of factories were built one after another, emitting large amounts of polluting gases. As a result, London was heavily polluted at that time, and no one was aware of air contamination since people were not very environmentally conscious. Besides, a vivid description about the air pollution can also be found in *Oliver Twist*. When Oliver was about to escape from the undertaker's shop, he found that "The sombre shadows thrown by the trees upon the ground, looked sepulchral and death-like, from being so still." (*Oliver Twist*, chapter seven) Under Dicken's description, London was a foggy city, which can also be proved from the Chinese translation of the title of this novel. However, in most people's opinion, London was once associated with the title of Fog Capital because of the 1952 London smog incident, which led to the death of tens of thousands of residents. It can be acknowledged that the contamination can't be done in a day, nor can resort it to the original state in a day, which needs a long-term effort.

The heavy fog over London not only represents air pollution, but also reflects that Victorian London carried many social ills. Though there were little environmental description in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, the description of the

heavy fog successfully gave the readers an impression of a black-and-white gray dirty, wet, cold and gloomy, where poverty, oppression, deception, discrimination and death were staged in. It all contributes from Dickens, who put the foggy features of Victorian London into the novel, which not only reveals the air pollution and makes people be personally on the scene, but also shows the readers a London shrouded with various social ills. Like being shrouded in fog, the bottom people could not breathe, while the arising bourgeoisie stepped on the shoulders of the poor to breathe fresh air freely ignoring the poor's sufferings.

4. REALITY OF CHARACTERS

As one of the essential elements in literary work, characters are always used to express the writer's view, which is of great importance. For example, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens expressed his criticism of the dark society by portraying some negative characters, like the ruthless officials in workhouse. Besides, in order to better reflect the society, the writer would tend to complicate characters to make them real. Based on the sociohistorical criticism, there are three standards applied to identify the reality of characters: whether characters are conform to their identity, whether their experience and development are logical, and whether their emotions are believable. The paper analyzes the reality of Oliver from his identity as an unlawful boy and the reality of Nancy from her contrariness which is believable.

4.1 Discrimination to Oliver as an Illegitimate Child

Oliver Twist was set in lower class with many of the characters in this novel were people in the bottom strata, like Noah, an orphan working in undertaker's shop, who had once got parents and a group of thieves, including Nancy, Fagin, Sikes etc. The author described such a scene that always happened in lower class in *Oliver Twist*: the stronger one or the richer one would bully the weaker and poorer one, just like the officials in workhouse always scolded or punished Oliver. So it can be seen, in chapter five, Noah, as a poor orphan, was always insulted by the young male shop assistants in the neighborhood, and Noah always suffered in silence, even not daring to reply. However, when he came across Oliver, Noah took it for grand to discriminate and bully Oliver who was also an orphan. It seemed unreasonable since both of them were the orphans at the bottom of society. In fact, just as Dickens observed in this novel, it indeed shows the reality of Oliver from his identity as an illegitimate child, since an illegitimate child would be discriminate by others at that age. In Victorian London, public thought highly of a woman's pure, thus an illegitimate child would be treated as the lowest. Just as Meyer Howard Abrams observed in his work *A Glossary of Literature Terms*

that the term “Victorian” was frequently used to imply the determination to maintain feminine “innocence”. (Abrams, 658) Oliver’s mother was judged as an unmarried “degenerate woman” by doctor’s words “no wearing a wedding ring, I see”. Oliver was recognized as an illegitimate child when he was born in the workhouse. He also be labelled with lots of negative things. For example,

“Enveloped in the old calico robes, badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once—a parish child—the orphan of a workhouse—the humble, hale-starved drudge—to be cuffed and buffeted through the world—despised by all, and pitied by none.” (*Oliver Twist*, chapter 1)

With so many labels, Oliver was doomed to become a “tainted” person at the bottom of the society in the age of Dickens, so even Noah who was also an orphan leading a poor life could look down on Oliver, after all Noah had his parents and Oliver was just an illegitimate child. From this point of view, the discrimination to Oliver is conform to his identity as an illegitimate child.

4.2 The Ambivalence of Nancy

Nancy is vividly portrayed in this novel. On the one hand, she was kind-hearted and always protected Oliver in the gang of thieves. She was so sympathetic to what Oliver had experienced that she gave Oliver a hand at the critical moment regardless of her own safety. It all contributed from her that Oliver successfully got rid of the hardship and led a happy life. On the other hand, she was a female thief, and once pulled Oliver back to the abyss personally after Oliver successfully got rid of the thief Gang.

It is clear that she could tell right from wrong, but since she stayed in the darkness for such a long time that once she got out of the dark and was exposed to the sun, she would be burnt by the sun. She yearned for the light but could not get rid of the darkness, which implied the tragic ending of Nancy. In fact, Nancy’s fate is the epitome of the people at the lower class. With the widening social gap, it is not easy to get away from the underworld and enter the upper class. In other words, it is difficulty for people at the bottom to be accepted by the upper class. The same fate would happen to Nancy again even if she bravely left the bottom of the society because there existed little possibility for her to find a job and survive in the upper class. In a word, the ambivalence of Nancy makes her vividly show in front of the readers, which is believable.

CONCLUSION

A novel produced in a particular era is bound to bear the characteristics of that era. Sociohistorical criticism

insists that literature reflects social life. The reality can be used as a standard to evaluate literary creation. Viewing from this point, to some extent, *Oliver Twist* is indeed a successful work, since its background and characters all show the reality of Victorian London.

The reality is embodied in the following three points: reality of the background, characters and details. The paper focuses to analyze the reality of setting and characters in *Oliver Twist*. According to Dickens’ description of the setting in this novel, the paper figures out they indeed reflect the progressive trend of the times. For example, the miserable life in workhouse described by the author in *Oliver Twist* reveals the poverty problem in England. The appearance of hanging exposes the physical and spiritual oppression imposed by the greedy and ruthless bourgeoisie to the poor. The description of London shrouded in fog brought us into the era of Industrial Revolution with lots of social ills, encouraging to build public awareness of environmental protection and seek for social reform to settle down social problems. In addition, the paper also analyzes the authenticity of characters from the reality of Oliver’s identity as an illegitimate child and the reality of Nancy from her contrariness which is believable.

With the help of this work, it is possible for readers to know the background of the Victorian era. The writer could reveal the dark side of capitalism and show the sufferings of the people at the bottom by describing life experiences of the poor. This realistic work could also arouse people’s conscience, urge people to think deeply about social reform, and then eliminate the unreasonable phenomena in society.

Although there are some romantic characteristics and dramatic coincidences that only appear on the stage in *Oliver Twist*, for example, Oliver miraculously met his relatives in a theft and finally led a happy life with his kind and rich relatives, the author’s efforts to expose the hidden social problems that happened in the land of the British Empire can’t be ignored.

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