

Dickens' Complex About the Poor Children

CHI Ren^{[a],*}; HAO Yu^[a]

^[a]Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 21 August 2013; accepted 8 December 2013

Abstract

In the history of literature, Dickens is the first one who threw considerable energy into his creations of children. Reflecting life through children's angle of view is a main characteristic of Dickens' art of novels. Such as Oliver Twist in *Oliver Twist*, Florence and Paul in *Dombey and Son*, David Copperfield in *David Copperfield*, Pip in *Great Expectation*. Through these characters, we can learn of the family love, the educational system, the school, the bad teaching and so on. Especially, through these characters, we also can know more about the writer, his background, and his growth circumstance, etc.

Key words: Childhood; Trauma; Complex

CHI Ren, HAO Yu (2013). Dickens' Complex About the Poor Children. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(6), 65-68. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020130906.C714>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020130906.C714>

1. RESEARCH DIRECTION

With the development of the social science and literary theory, Scholars of Dickens' research is no longer confined to the understanding of history and formalism from the perspective of analysis, but from psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism and so many perspectives to explore and research. Dickens is a strong ideological writer; he is described by personal experience. Through these stories Dickens touch on the existing social problems and political issues which were happened at that time. Such as the decadent and backward education system and the judicial system, the sharp conflicts between rich and poor and inequality property caused

by marital problems, women problem, unemployment, The tragic situation of the working class people and the child labor. Dickens' novels from these specific questions expressed his reformist ideals and his hope of political society. In Dickens' novels, Orphans as a dominant image of a symbol of the weak and lonely time, the writer learn through the orphans' experience and expressed loneliness of this world. Through the children's experiences and perspectives, the novelist reveals the indifference of the society, and declares the hearts of Long-lasting feelings of anger. I collect a large quality historical data which the previous scholars left, further more, I synthesize a variety of perspectives psychological analysis of Dickens' writing, as well as to explore the childhood experiences of Writer.

2. SCHOLARS' RESEARCH AND VIEWS

For many years, people research the complex between Dickens and his poor children characters. A large number of books written by ancient and modern scholars have published. Among these, Peter Coveney, *poor Monkey* (1957; reprinted and revised as *The Image of Childhood* [penguin Books, 1967]), is the classic starting point. Coveney argues that there is a general decline in the quality of representations of the child after the Romantics. The indispensable subsequent study of the child in nineteenth-century literature generally is David Grylls, *Guardians and Angels* (Faber and Faber, 1978), which draws on a rich array of interdisciplinary secondary sources. The major studies of the child in Dickens are Angus Wilson, "Dickens on Children and Childhood," in *Dickens* 1970ed. Michael Slater (Chapman and Hall, 1970) and, most recently, Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-up child* (University of Iowa press, 1994). It is worth mentioning that Angus Wilson identifies three main sources for Dickens' concern with children and childhood the autobiographical, the social,

and the metaphysical-historical, Wilson points out that the autobiographical source is overworked, and that the social source has been treated with considerable thoroughness and sensitivity by Philip Collins and Humphry House. But he suggests that the metaphysical-historical source has been comparatively unexplored. By this he means Dickens' attempt to resolve the metaphysical debate concerning the meaning and value of childhood that Dickens inherited from the previous century. Research shows that Dickens' children images can be divided into three types: the children who experienced lots of sufferings; the children whose fates were tragic; the children who only existed in author's ideal.

3. DICKENS COMPLEX ABOUT THE POOR CHILDREN

Dickens pays close attention on poor children's childhood in all his creation life.

As a first romantic poetry which put children in the image of the introduction of the core of the great fiction writer. From "Oliver Twist" (1837-1838) to "Great Expectations" (1861) of 25 years, Charles put the heroine's childhood as the main object of the description and the use of children in Victorian times to reflect the perspective of social life. He was good at putting children's pure hearts, a keen intuition and subtle psychological in complex and contradictory social environment, so that the two form a strong contrast. Dickens's enthusiasm to the theme of childhood and child characters goes beyond any English writer's. Well, this complex resource from a beautiful and nightmarish childhood. To know a writer, it must know his time, his experience, his mentality in Process, and then we will start with the following understanding of some aspects of Dickens, his historical background, his unwilling mentioned childhood memories.

3.1 Background of Dickens

The Victorian Era of the United Kingdom was the period of Queen Victoria's reign from June 1837 to January 1901. [This was a long period of prosperity for the British people, as profits gained from the overseas British Empire, as well as from industrial improvements at home, allowed a large, educated middle class to develop.

3.2 Poverty

19th century Britain saw a huge population increase accompanied by rapid urbanization stimulated by the industrial revolution. The large numbers of skilled and unskilled people looking for work kept wages down to barely subsistence level. Available housing was scarce and expensive, resulting in overcrowding. These problems were magnified in London, where the population grew at record rates. Large houses were turned into flats and tenements, and as landlords failed to maintain these dwellings slum housing developed. Kellow Chesney

described the situation as follows: "Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the metropolis... In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room (The Victorian Underworld)".

3.3 Child Labour

The Victorian era became notorious for the employment of young children in factories and mines and as chimney sweeps. Child labour, often brought about by economic hardship, played an important role in the Industrial Revolution from its outset: Charles Dickens for example worked at the age of 12 in a blacking factory, with his family in a debtor's prison. In 1840, only about 20 percent of the children in London had any schooling. By 1860 about half of the children between 5 and 15 were in school (including Sunday school).

The children of the poor were expected to help towards the family budget, often working long hours in dangerous jobs for low wages. Agile boys were employed by the chimney sweeps; small children were employed to scramble under machinery to retrieve cotton bobbins; and children were also employed to work in coal mines, crawling through tunnels too narrow and low for adults. Children also worked as errand boys, crossing sweepers, or shoe blacks, or selling matches, flowers and other cheap goods. Some children undertook work as apprentices to respectable trades, such as building, or as domestic servants (there were over 120,000 domestic servants in London in the mid-18th century). Working hours were long: builders might work 64 hours a week in summer and 52 in winter, while domestic servants worked 80 hour weeks. Many young people worked as prostitutes (the majority of prostitutes in London were between 15 and 22 years of age).

Children as young as three were put to work. In coal mines children began work at the age of five and generally died before the age of 25. Many children (and adults) worked 16 hour days. As early as 1802 and 1819 Factory Acts were passed to limit the working hours of workhouse children in factories and cotton mills to 12 hours per day. These acts were largely ineffective and after radical agitation, by for example the "Short Time Committees" in 1831, a royal commission recommended in 1833 that children aged 11-18 should work a maximum of 12 hours per day, children aged 9-11 a maximum of eight hours, and children under the age of nine should no longer be permitted to work. This act, however, only applied to the textile industry, and further agitation led to another act in 1847 limiting both adults and children to 10 hour working day. Dickens lives and creative time, it is the early time of Queen Victoria the mid-19th century. Dickens's life activities and creative, always synchronized with the trend of the times.

3.4 Childhood Experiences: Boarding School Life

At lots of Dickens' works, such as *David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Sons*, we can see some poor helpless orphans. They do not have relatives, no father or no mother, without food, clothing, and living in a subhuman condition. From these unfortunately experiences of the children, we can see how a capitalist society ruthless is, children's physical and mental health suffered a terrible devastation. The reason why the author put the bloody truth out is his personal experience inseparable.

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth. His parents were John and Elizabeth Dickens. Charles was the second of their eight children. John was a clerk in a payroll office of the navy. He and Elizabeth were an outgoing, social couple. They loved parties, dinners and family functions. In fact, Elizabeth attended a ball on the night that she gave birth to Charles. Finances were a constant concern for the family. The costs of entertaining along with the expenses of having a large family were too much for John's salary. In fact, when Charles was just four months old the family moved to a smaller home to cut expenses.

4. PSYCHOLOGY OF THE WRITER: HATE AND DIFFICULT TO FORGET

The first to tell the story above was John Foster, in his life of Dickens, and he give it mainly in the words of fragment of autobiography that Dickens entrusted him with. It was first written around 1847, but left unfinished; perhaps it seemed too outspoken. But in fact it was largely used in the 11st and earlier chapters of his novel *David Copperfield* (1849-1850). According to Foster, he first came to learn it by accident. One day in March or April of 1847, Foster asked if Dickens remembered a Mr. Dilke who once met Dickens in a warehouse near the Strand where he was employed, and who gave him a half-crown. Dickens was silent for several minutes"; and Foster immediately sensed that he" had unintentionally touched a painful place in his memory." Some weeks later, Dickens told Foster that he had" struck unconsciously upon a time of which he never could lose the remembrance while he remembered anything ,and the recollection of which, at intervals, haunted him and made him miserable, even to that hour". Dickens' own account enlivens and almost overflows the pages of Forster's account, with interpolations by his friend. And whether before or after the rise of many schools and approaches of analyses that assess and show all sorts of aspects of Dickens in this obscure early period, the base of our knowledge is almost entirely Forster's biography. Dickens first expresses his deep sense of being neglected and his burning desire for education, using a passionate and rhythmical rhetoric, underlying his feeling with better sarcasm: He mentions his being completely alone and unassisted more than once.

And in his own words, he tells of his disappointment, depression and pain:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I...felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position...can-not be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I had a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.

The wound and scar were perpetual, and it is clear that he never fully got over the pain and shame. Like *David Copperfield*, whenever he read in reverse the inscription on a coffee-room window (as he had at that time), he said "a shock goes through my blood." It is what G. K. Chesterton calls the "moor-eeffoc" effect, a strong sense of fear and misery, like an epiphany. His having to work by the window for all the world to see must have especially hurt him." I saw my father coming in at the door one day when we were very busy, and I wondered how he could bear it," in agony Dickens tells of his feeling of being abandon and humiliated. Fortunately, after some time, John Dickens quarreled with the employer James Lamert, thus ending his son's factory life.

His agony haunted him all his life, and his silence lasted a quarter of a century. He emphasizes how reticent he was about the past: "I never said, to man or boy, how it was that I came to be there.... That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is ...utterly beyond my power to tell". "Until old Hungerford-market was pulled down, until old Hungerford-stairs were destroyed," he had no courage to revisit the factory that became the symbol of the dark corner of his heart, because it reminded him of what he was once. In fact, after forty years when he was able to revisit the scene, the sight of it was overwhelming" It was a crazy, tumble-down old house...literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase ,and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars , and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times , and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me , as if I were there age.

5. REFLECTION OF THE REALITY

Dickens' warehouse experience finds its way into his novels. For example, the character Bob Fagin is based on a boy who on Dickens' first day at Warren's helped him learn the tricks of wrapping and tying up the pots. Pickwick's most devoted servant, Sam Weller, uses Day and Martin's blacking that can arouse the envy of Mr. Warren. Young *David Copperfield*, employed by a firm of wine-merchants, Murdstone & Grinby, bears a close resemblance to young Dickens .We have the

authoritative verdict from the author himself. Just after he had completed the part about David's warehouse adventures, Dickens wrote to Forster saying he had "done it ingeniously, and with a very complicated interweaving of his plan for No.5 of David Copperfield, Dickens notes, "what I know so well" (Stone, Dickens's Working Notes 148). In *Great Expectations*, when Joe Gargery first comes up to London, he goes and looks at the Blacking Warehouse. In *Barnaby Rudge*, an old house called "The Warren" is "moldering to ruin", and in which the secrets of the past are buried. For more than a half century, students of Dickens have emphasized the crucial importance of the traumatic period in his life when his parents suddenly removed him from school and their middle-class, more-or-less genteel environment, made him live apart from the family, and forced him to work at Warren's Shoeblicking factory and warehouse. As Walter Allen points out, this experience had crucial influence on (i) the writer's emphasis upon orphans and abandoned children, (ii) the self-pity that permeates many of his works, and (iii) their fairy-tale plots:

The blacking factory episode does not account for Dickens' genius, but it does, I believe, explain some of the forms his genius took, and it throws light on much that is otherwise baffling both in his art and his life. It explains why we so often find at the centre of his novels the figure of the lost, persecuted, or helpless child: Oliver Twist, Little Nell, David, Paul Dombey, Pip, and their near relations, Smirke and Jo, in *Bleak House*. It explains, too, why their rescue, when there is a rescue, so often has the appearance of a fairy-story ending, the result of what is sometimes called wishful thinking, just as the deaths of Little Nell, Paul Dombey, and Jo are dramatizations of his own self-pity. And it explains the dominant mood in which his world is created. It was not at all one of good-humoured acceptance of things, but a mood of nightmare compounded of lurid melodrama and savage comedy, relieved from time to time by unreflecting joy in the absurd and the comic for their own sakes'

Alexander Welsh similarly argues that the secret memory of the blacking warehouse explains a great deal in Dickens's life and fiction. It partially explains why, in the midst of his success with *Pickwick*, he should begin a fairy tale of the workhouse child, *Oliver Twist*. It explains the vein of self-pity that crops up again and again in the

novels, and particularly the childlike sentiment that if he had died or turned bad, it would have served the grown-ups right. While he was unable to learn from the lessons of his own life perhaps we, his readers, can be more fortunate. A study of his life reveals that perfection is not a qualification for success and that no one really defines us but ourselves. The painful childhood make Dickens concerned about the poor, especially the poor children, with a deep sympathy, and created a lot of themes for children's works

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the various aspects of the reason why Dickens devoted himself to describing the images of children's characters. Dickens repeats his painful memories of childhood in the novels, because it is difficult for him to forget his bitter experience in his childhood. He observes the society in the perspective of a child in order to expose social problems, as well as to heal the trauma of his childhood.

As a world-class great master in literature, Dickens' writing of this unprecedented preference has brought about a great impact to later writers. First, his works are suitable for both adults and children, which is a precious wealth in literature for children in the world. Second, he created a new writing style, which profoundly influenced later writers over generations, such as Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Stevenson, James, Mark Twain, Joys, and so on. Lastly, his literary works also provide a large amount of historical materials for people to study the social forms of the Victoria era.

REFERENCES

- Ackroyd, P. (1988). *Charles dickens' childhood*. London: Macmillan.
- Andrews, M. (1994). *Dickens and the grown-up child*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Coveney, P. (1967). *The image of childhood*. North Carolina: Penguin Books.
- Low, N. (1998). *Mastering modern British history*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, G. (1966). *Charles Dickens: A literary life*. London: Macmillan.