



Charles Dickens' Benevolent Spirit as Revealed in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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Abstract

A Tale of Two Cities, one of Charles Dickens' most representative work, reveals and criticizes the fact that the working people suffered the oppression from the aristocracy. Moreover, the novel showed that the revolution was bloody and cruel. Dickens revealed his benevolent spirit, namely, he showed sympathy for the poor working people and urged people to use love to dissolve hatred. Some critics thought that his spirit was unpractical fantasy. Through the analysis of Dickens' life and times, the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* as well as his other works, the author points out that Dickens' benevolent spirit has its practical meaning in modern times.

Key words: Dickens; *A Tale of Two Cities*; Benevolent spirit; Practical meaning

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INTRODUCTION

The famous British writer Charles Dickens created many excellent works, which depicted the life of the Victorian society vividly and comprehensively. He exposed the evil of the capitalist society through his great vision. Those works have one thing in common, that is, a critical analysis of the society in the 19th century which is incomparable in its scope and depth.

The author would like to deal with one of his greatest novels, *A Tale of Two Cities*, from the aspect of his benevolent spirit, for this novel is a representative of the spirit. Many critics regard his benevolent spirit as a kind of impractical and abstract "human love". From the point of view of the author, however, his benevolent spirit has its progressive and practical meanings at that time. A close study of Dickens' life shows that his life influenced his writing style, and that his works reflected his benevolent spirit. Therefore, to modern writers and scholars, it is worth learning and appreciating. To modern community, it has its realistic significance.

1. THE IMPACT OF BENEVOLENT SPIRIT ON DICKENS AND WRITERS OF HIS TIMES

1.1 The Definition of Benevolent Spirit

Ever since the dawn of human civilization, humanitarianism came into being. But humanitarianism as an ideological thought and theory was generally developed since the Renaissance. It was a trend of thought and theory on human nature, mission, status, value and personality development. It is an ideological system which advocates showing care and respect for people, allowing solicitude for people, and realizing the world outlook of people oriented and people centered. During the French bourgeois revolution, the embodiments of the spirit were the catchwords: freedom, equality and fraternity. At that time, it played the role of opposing the feudal system and autocracy, churchly, politically, ideologically and so on. It is a category of philosophy which is growing and changing.

However, the benevolent spirit which the author analyzes here is a part of humanitarianism. The spirit is especially concerned with the community, people's livelihood and the development of human beings. Its

practical aims were to create good living environment for people, and establish that everyone is equal and people should do good things. And this is also what Dickens' benevolent spirit cares about.

1.2 Benevolent Spirit as Revealed in the Works of Writers of Dickens' Times

Besides Charles Dickens, there were other famous writers who were influenced by the benevolent spirit of that age. They were all humanists, and cared about the community and people's life. However, in some aspects, there were differences between their benevolent spirits. In what follows, the author introduces the benevolent spirit of Thomas Hardy and Victor Hugo.

British poet Thomas Hardy once said:

Whether the human and kindred animal races survive till the exhaustion or destruction of the globe, or whether these races perish and are succeeded by others before that conclusion comes, pain to all upon it, tongued or dumb, shall be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge, and actuated by the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life. (Hardy, 2003, p.5)

The benevolent spirit permeates Hardy's poetry. Hardy advocated universal love and loved nature, animals and plants. In *The Breaking of Nations*, the war and dynasties will disappear and be replaced, but people's love and reproduction will be eternal. In "The Wind Blew Words", Hardy told people that they should care for trees for they are lives. This poem showed Hardy's universal love. Hardy hated war and he once said: "Nothing effectual will be accomplished in the cause of peace till the sentiment of patriotism be freed from the narrow meaning attaching to it in the past and be extended to the whole globe" (Hardy, 2007, p.375). Hardy thought that only peace and love could make people survive and develop. In "Drummer Hodge", Hardy showed his sympathy for the dead in the war and indignation to the war. He wrote many poems to show that war is evil, such as *Poems of War* and *Patriotism* and *In Time of War and Tumults*. Charles Dickens paid more attention to people's livelihood, while Thomas Hardy cared more about world peace and universal love.

French romantic writer Victor Hugo, was also a representative of humanitarianism and was regarded as the French Shakespeare. His works reflected French events and the hardships of the common people in the 19th century. His masterpieces *Les Miserables* and *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* were the major works in which his benevolent spirit is best presented. *Les Miserables* told us the story of Jean Valjean who was kept in jail for 19 years for he stole bread for his nephews. Later he was influenced by a priest and decided to turn over a new leaf. And he became a mayor and helped Fantine to bring up her daughter Cosette. And then he saved Cosette's boyfriend Marius, who was a revolutionary youth. Jean Valjean was a kind person, but the society made him have no confidence in the government and its law. He became

a good person again and an altruist after the priest's guidance. Moreover, he set free the detective Javert who was always chasing him, and he asked Cosette to forgive those who did harm to him. At that time, he had become a perfect saint. Hugo showed his sympathy to the Paris uprising. Though he applauded the revolution, he thought that it was too cruel. In this novel, Hugo thought that every bad person can be good if there was a chance for him to start with a clean state. In *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*, Gauvain, who was a commander of revolutionary force, caught Marquis Lantenac, the leader of the royalists. But he set him free because he thought Lantenac was not a bad person as he saved three children regardless of his own safety. However, Gauvain himself was sentenced to death. Many people pleaded for him and the executor Cimourdain, who was Gauvain's tutor when he was a boy, had conflict in his heart and killed himself to be rid of the dilemma. Hugo showed that the revolution was too inhuman, and only using benevolence to beat evil can solve the problem. The two characters thought that good people should not be killed and they would like to sacrifice themselves to save the good. Hugo also revealed his benevolent spirit through his sympathy to the poor, but there was a difference between him and Dickens, that is, he eulogized the arduous struggle that the people made for their own liberation.

1.3 Critics' Views on Dickens' Benevolent Spirit

Generally, people think that Dickens is a realistic novelist whose works are devoid of the ingredient of romanticism. British novelist George Gissing thought that Dickens was like Shakespeare, for they were both idealists. He even referred to Dickens' method as romantic realism. British writer G. K. Chesterton thought that what Dickens created was not humans but gods. He regarded Dickens as the last writer of mythology in Britain, and believed him to be the greatest. Ideal humanism should not exclude romanticism. In his works, there were romantic love, romantic virtue, and romantic vicissitudes. However, his benevolent spirit was too romantic to be practical.

1.4 The Development and Influence of Dickens' Benevolent Spirit

Dickens was a famous novelist in the world mostly because his works were rich and colorful, grand and magnificent, refined and popular. Above all, his works were full of ideal benevolent spirit. His works were adapted into many kinds of popular and children's books and entertainment programs. Dickens was always concentrating on children, which was an important part of his benevolent spirit. In his early works, such as *Oliver Twist*, he called on the society to show benevolence to the growth of children. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens clarified that the warmth of the family was vital to children's development. In *Hard Times*, Dickens emphasized that the educational institution should be

humanized. And these had been taken seriously by the world, especially in China. China has been building a harmonious community, including harmonious education which is beneficial to the students.

2. CHARLES DICKENS' BENEVOLENT SPIRIT AS REVEALED IN A TALE OF TWO CITIES

2.1 The Background of the Novel

Long before Dickens created *A Tale of Two Cities*, he showed great concern for the French Revolution, and he repeatedly read the British historian Thomas Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* and relevant works of other scholars. He was interested in the French Revolution because he was worried about the latent serious social crisis in the United Kingdom at that time. He thought that the situation was very dangerous, just as that before the outbreak of the revolution in France. If people had a poor harvest, the loss of war overseas and so on, it would turn into a terrible fire just like the French Revolution. He wanted to use this novel to warn the British ruling class, and find a way out of the growing British social contradictions.

2.2 A Brief Introduction of the Novel

This book tells us a story that happened in the two cities, London and Paris, in the 18th century. The narration was interspersed with flashbacks and ups and downs. Dr. Manette was put into Bastille and was locked up for 18 years. With the cipher "recall to life", the plot was developed. The doctor's daughter, Lucie Manette, thought her father had died many years ago. But now the bank clerk, who took her to England, told her that her father was still alive that he was not so clear-headed and was in Madame Defarge's wine house. Lucie took Dr. Manette to London and during the trip they met Charles who hated his uncle Marquis and left Paris. Unfortunately, Marquis was the very man who killed a guy and hurt the guy's sister and sent Dr. Manette into prison. Charles was so kind-hearted that Dr. Manette forgave him. Hence Charles could be in contact with Lucie. During the time, Charles was set up, and sent to court of treason, and a lawyer called Carton, who also liked Lucie, helped him out. Lucie loved Charles and married him. At that time, France was brewing a great revolution. After the revolution succeeded, the poor people who had been oppressed so much in the past wanted to kill the noble no matter they were innocent or not. Charles wanted to go to Paris to save his teacher, who was a humanist, but he was caught in a trap. He was put into the court once more. In the court, the jury was composed of poor, angry and illiterate people and they said "guilty" all the time. Madame Defarge took out a bloody letter which was written by Dr. Manette in Bastille

as evidence and Charles was condemned to death. At this crucial time, Carton asked Lucie to take her daughter to England and he himself decided to displace Charles and was beheaded. However, Defarge didn't want to spare Lucie and her little daughter. She came to their house and in the end she was killed by her own gun.

This novel profoundly uncovered the activated social contradiction in France through the experience of the Manette's family. The author criticized the nobility for their cruelty and lechery. It toughly pointed out that people's endurance has a limit and under the oppression they must revolt. Marquis insulted Madame Defarge and killed her brother. He always drove fast in the streets and once killed a poor boy. Then the novel showed the grand sight that Paris people captured Bastille and it showed the great strength of the people. At first Defarge was depicted as an excellent leader and she was an iron lady. The poor boy's father killed Marquis and the people wanted to kill all the noble people. The author was against class oppression but he was also against violent revolution. Under the author's pen, the revolution was a destructive catastrophe as it both punished the cruel nobility and the innocent. The fact that Dr. Manette forgave Charles revealed that violence should not be used on the innocent. At last Defarge became a bloodlust and she got her retribution. There were two other idealists, Mr. Carton and Charles. They wanted to use universal love to influence people and help them get rid of bad behaviors. They wanted to change the world through this way but it was not practical.

2.3 Benevolent Spirit in the Novel

2.3.1 Analysis From the Perspective of Dickens' Writing Techniques

Dickens is a master of various writing techniques. In the novel, the use of the following techniques well proves this.

In the first place, he is adept at creating suspense to arouse readers' interest and make the plot deceptive. At the beginning, the catchword "recalled to life" makes the reader wonder who came back to life. Why was this old man kept in jail for 18 years? It is mystery for readers. Before the marriage between Lucie and Charles, Charles wanted to reveal his identity but he was refused by Doctor Manette. Why did he stop him? When he knew Charles's identity he was out of his mind and this situation lasted for a long time. What was the relationship between Charles and Mr. Manette? In the end, when the court read out Manette's blood letter, readers came to realize all of the things. In this way, Dickens displayed the splendor of Manette's tolerance and benevolence, and conveys to the readers the idea that love can dissolve hatred.

Secondly, Dickens used symbols. In the first part, it mentioned the French woods, "there were growing trees" and "make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it." (Dickens, 1992, p.5) The symbolic meaning

of this is that something was growing and the certain tool would cut some people's head. Here it indicated the French revolution. Sentence such as "A large cask of wine had been dropped and broken in the street" and "All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine" (Ibid., p.47) meant the revolution (cask) broke out, all the people would join and the blood (red wine) would redden the whole country. The consequences are described as "There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time." (Ibid., p.483) The message is quite explicit: The guillotine cut those heads with no stopping. Here, the guillotine was not punishment but the wickedness of revolution. Dickens used those to express the terror of revolution and his concern.

Last but not the least, Dickens used the method of contrast to show the enormous difference between the noble and the poor. The first paragraph of this novel presents all the contrasts:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Ibid., p.1)

The former sentences were from the perspective of the noble, because they were living in a rich and dissolute life, while the latter sentences from the perspective of those poor, as they were living in a poverty-stricken and oppressed life. The reader can easily detect that Dickens revealed his sympathy for the poor and criticism of the noble.

2.3.2 Analysis From the Perspective of the Characters

The characters in the novel can be classified into four types: ideal positive ones, self-sacrificial ones, revolutionary ones and the noble ones.

Ideal positive characters: Firstly, Doctor Manette. He was upright and full of sympathy and never bowed to the wicked power. However he was set up and sent to jail. He was full of hatred and swore to revenge. But after he got out of the prison, he gave up his hatred for his daughter. He even went to the court to help Charles. He was an incarnation of humanism and his tolerance reflected Dickens's benevolent spirit. Charles is another positive character in the novel. He was not contaminated by his family background and hated the atrocity of the noble. So he gave up the rich life and went to London and became a teacher. He knew that it was very dangerous to go to Paris, but he did go back for his teacher, also a humanist. Dickens criticized the revolutionary people for their

violence. And it showed that Dickens opposed bloody revolution, a revelation of his benevolent spirit.

Self-sacrificial character: Take Carton as an example. He was an ideal altruist. He was incompatible with the time although he was talented and had a noble character. He became indifferent, cynical and abandoned. However, he was filled with benevolence. When Charles was going to be beheaded, he replaced him because he loved Charles' wife, and was determined to sacrifice himself for his love. Dickens used the sentence from the Holy Bible in order to show Carton's noble character. Through this character Dickens directly advocated his benevolent spirit that is using pardon, benevolence and cooperation to substitute violent behavior. It proved that violence brought no good because it killed many nice people.

Revolutionary Character: Mrs. Defarge is a good example of this. She was from a poor family and her brother and sister were killed by the noble. She had the deep hatred so she joined the revolution and became a leader. She realized her wish to revenge, but at the same time she became a bloodlust fiend. Dickens described her savage atrocity through her killing will, which is she wanted to kill all those noble and their descendants including Lucie's daughter. At last, she was killed by her own gun. It showed that Dickens was against violence revolution or she would not get that end.

The Aristocratic Character: Take Marquis as an example. He used his position to commit all manner of crimes and treat human life as straw. Definitely, his evildoings aroused widespread anger. Dickens reprimanded this character very much, and Marquis was doomed to destruction with no doubt. Here, Dickens's benevolent spirit was showed by his denouncement to the evil noble class.

2.3.3 Analysis From the Perspective of Dickens' Language and Artistic Style

Dickens wrote this novel in simple and plain words and sentences, but they had great power. The very first paragraph of the novel fills the reader with wonder, what simple language! A careful consideration of this paragraph indicates that the simple language was used to satirize the age, and the parallelism reads like a lyric and it was rich in philosophical thoughts.

The description of the following scene shocks the reader to the realization of the deplorable relationship between people. All the people were on the alert and did not help each other.

The Dover mail was in its usual genial position that the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guard, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses; as to which cattle he could with a clear conscience have taken his oath on the two Testaments that they were not fit for the journey. (Ibid., p.10)

When Lucie went to see her father, she found him weak and had few words and he even forgot his name.

However, he just said: "One hundred and five, North Tower". From his words, readers can find he has been suffering persecution and became a fool. His simple language repudiates the dark society. And his language showed his benevolent spirit.

2.3.4 Analysis From the Perspective of Dickens's Religious Inclination

The motivation that Dickens created this novel was to reflect the hardship of the people and denounce the atrocity of the noble. Moreover, he wanted to advocate his religious feeling, that is, benevolence and immortality of Christ. Before Carton was killed, Dickens used the sentence from the New Testaments "I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Ibid., p.556). Jesus sacrificed himself to influence and save his people and Carton chose to help those he love. Dickens believed that the good people died for others will become immortal. It showed that he advocated people to sacrifice for others then people can acquire other's respect and loves, therefore, there would be a beautiful world. Dickens hoped that all human beings could strive to be good and this was also his benevolent spirit.

CONCLUSION

On the grounds of the analyses of Dickens's life and times, his works and other writers' works, the author comes to the conclusion that Dickens' benevolent spirit has four features:

First and foremost, his benevolent spirit paid much attention to the stability of the society. He wished that the upper class and the underclass can live together peacefully to make a harmonious society. If there was no peaceful living environment, there would be no peace between the classes.

In the second place, his benevolent spirit praised people's efforts to use their love to dissolve hatred. Just as the old saying goes, "hatred calls forth nothing but more

hatred". Dickens wanted people to show their love for other people to make a world of love.

Thirdly, his benevolent spirit emphasized that people should chase material wealth and spiritual happiness through their own hard work instead of by means of gambling and other people's support. You will have ample food and clothing through your self-reliance.

Lastly, his benevolent spirit cared about children's living and education. It advocated the idea that the society should pay more attention to the children, and provides a good environment for them to live and study. Only in this way would people have a good future.

In a word, Dickens' benevolent spirit is progressive and practical not only in that age but also in modern time. That is why his benevolent spirit is worth learning and researching.

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