

Analysis of British Charitable Thoughts in *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract: *In the 19th century, the operation of Britain's old poverty relief act was under great pressure. However, the promulgation of the new poverty relief act was another form of exploitation and oppression of the poor. In this context, Dickens's realistic work Oliver Twist exposes the social problems such as child abuse, poor house corruption, exploitation and oppression of the people after the revision of the British poverty relief system. Dickens reveals the proposition "poverty is crime" and "relief is exploitation" implied in the British poverty relief system, and explained his pluralistic charity thought of self-help, mutual assistance and assistance.*

Keywords: *Oliver Twist*, The British poverty relief system, Poverty is crime, Relief is exploitation, Pluralistic charitable thought.

1. Introduction

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is widely regarded as one of the greatest British writers in the 19th century. Dickens lived in the middle of the 19th century. His activities and creations have always kept up with the trend of the times. He pioneered city novels, sympathizing with the life experiences of "little people" living at the bottom of British society. His works deeply reflect the complex social reality of Britain at that time and made outstanding contributions to the development of British critical realism literature. At the same time, he also eulogized the truth, goodness and beauty in human nature and imagined a better society with the color of idealism and romanticism.

As one of Dickens' representative works, *Oliver Twist* depicts the poverty and misfortune hidden under the prosperity of the Empire in the Victorian era. At that time, the British industrial revolution greatly improved production efficiency, but also made countless traditional handicraft workers lose their jobs. In addition, the enclosure movement also made many farmers lose their land. They were forced to flow into the city under the pressure of survival, which further expanded the number of urban refugees. With the increasing number of refugees, the British government was aware of the shortcomings of the original poverty relief law, so it decided to reform the poverty relief law system. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* was created under this background.

As a work that deeply reveals the reality of Britain, *Oliver Twist* has received widespread attention from scholars. Some scholars pay attention to the language skills of *Oliver Twist*, some scholars pay attention to its translation features, others pay attention to its romantic realism, and so on. From the perspective of the essence of British poverty relief, some scholars have also made explorations: She Jun's research on *Oliver Twist* focuses on the social problems exposed by the 19th century British poverty system reform reflected in the novel, and expresses the author's thoughts of moral judgment and charitable assistance. Wu Wenquan and Gao Xianming's research explores the oppression suffered by the characters in *Oliver Twist* on the premise of the inherent institutional obstacles of the new poor law. The key to Chen Houliang's interpretation of *Oliver Twist* lies in exploring the hypocrisy of bourgeois poverty alleviation from the perspective of class. From the perspective of different groups, this paper explores

the hypocritical essence of the British poverty relief system and the good wishes of the author Dickens.

2. Studies on the Bottom Poor in *Oliver Twist*

As Dickens showed in *Oliver Twist*, in the 19th century, the poor people in Britain were labeled as "criminal class": officials believed that the poverty of the poor was entirely due to their own laziness and lack of progress. Therefore, the relief system in this period essentially focused on punishing the poor, and the conditions for receiving relief were very strict (Guo Jiahong, 2007). The experience of the lower class reflects the thought of "poverty is crime" in the cause of poverty relief in Britain.

2.1 Principle of Workhouse Test

In 1832, the British government drafted the principles that should be followed in the new poverty act. This principle is what we now call the workhouse test, including carrying out "indoor relief" and forcing the poor who enter the workhouse to bear heavy labor. Their idea was that the treatment level of the relief recipients should be significantly lower than the minimum wage of the self-supporting. This principle is also evident in *Oliver Twist*. Before allowing the poor to enter the workhouse, there are three requirements to be met: first, they must hand over all their property to prove that they are really poor; Secondly, they must be separated from their families and endure the pain of losing their families; In addition: the poor who enter the workhouse have to bear heavy labor. In short, the function of the workhouse has changed from relief to punishment (Li Wen, 2012), putting the poor in shame and inferiority.

At that time, people used to call the workhouse "the Bastille prison of the poor" (Driver, 1993), which exposed to a certain extent that the workhouse was like a prison and the relief conditions were very harsh (David, 1963). As Driver said, the workhouse system was obviously not designed to serve the poor; On the contrary, it was designed to manage the poor (Driver, 1993). For the British poor, the so-called "charity"—workhouse is more like a dark prison. Their final choice is nothing more than two kinds: "either slowly starve to death in the Art Institute, or quickly starve to death outside the Art Institute." (Dickens, 10) Obviously, the essence of the "new

poverty relief law” is an important tool for the ruling class to regulate and restrict the freedom of the poor (She Jun, 2019).

2.2 Principle of Less Eligibility

In fact, in the 19th century, the poor and the criminal class in British society were gradually equated (Chen Houliang, 2017). On the one hand, the government shows the tendency of the poor to be forced to work when formulating laws. This is also described in *Oliver Twist*. After Oliver was born, he was put on a yellow smock, “he was labeled and immediately classified into his class—the children of the parish, the children of the workhouse” (Dickens, 3). In addition, the foster home where he lived had “twenty or thirty small prisoners who violated the poverty relief law” (Dickens, 4). According to the law issued by the British government, all “jobless vagrants” or poor people who ask for social relief must be sent to the poor Arts Institute to engage in compulsory labor. Therefore, innocent children like Oliver are forced to be labeled as “Prisoners.”

On the other hand, the poor are unable to make a living and are indeed gradually on the path of crime. “Dilapidated houses,” “dirty and smelly water,” “rats starved to death in smelly ditches” (Dickens, 31) and other realistic descriptions depict the extremely difficult life of the lower class. Due to the pressure of survival and dissatisfaction in their hearts, they went begging (begging on the street was a crime in Britain at that time), stealing and robbery. The old Fagin Gang is one of the representatives. They have many contact points, living in dirty and dilapidated slums and speaking slang that only they can understand (Wu Wenquan, Gao Xianming, 2020).

3. Studies on the Top Officials in Oliver Twist

3.1 The Phenomenon of Official Corruption

In the novel, Dickens uses sarcastic tone to praise the members of the Poverty Law Council for being “extremely smart,” but they only use this intelligence for their own self-interest. In the foster home, children were under “the parental superintendence” of an elderly woman: she was afraid that the children would break their stomachs, so she appropriated most of the living expenses given to the children by the parish to her own use. Even if the living expenses were not enough to feed the children, she still deeply practiced the theory of “a horse being able to live without eating” for a long time (Dickens, 4). However, this phenomenon is very common in workhouses. In winter, homeless people starve to death by the roadside and the poor in the workhouse can’t get enough food or warm clothes, while the director and beadle of the workhouse taste the newly brewed wine without any sediment by the warm stove.

In order to control the size of the workhouse and reduce the expenditure on street relief, these great “philosophers” came up with other ways: “to give the paupers exactly what they don’t want; and then they get tired of coming.” (Dickens, 183) In fact, this is exactly what they do: they “mercifully” give a mouthful to the poor who pray for a little coal and a few slices of cheese to the poor and sick families. They proudly preached their kindness and greatness, as if to prove that they were responsible for their work. While “selling” Oliver, the

members of the Council still had no mercy after hearing the death of Gamfield’s mistreatment of his apprentices. Instead, they wanted to use this as a handle to save more money. In their view, Oliver was a “burden” and was not as expensive as money.

3.2 The Phenomenon of Official Exploitation

There are many ways for the officers of the workhouse to squeeze and exploit the poor who enter the workhouse. Here are the two main ways. One is to provide a small amount of food. Much of this is due to the private enrichment of workhouse staff such as Mrs. Mann and Mr. Bumble. When Oliver turned nine, he was pale, short and thin. Thanks to Mrs. Mann’s great “parenting philosophy,” malnourished children like Oliver are the norm in workhouses. The workhouse serves only three gruel meals a day, but the natural physiological appeal of children born of hunger is regarded as an act of “impious and profane offence” (Dickens, 5).

The second is to force the poor to work. As the UK Poverty Relief Law Commission said, all relief fund managers should become the strictest foremen (Ding Jianding, 2014). At six o’clock in the morning the day after Oliver returned to the workhouse, he was forced to do the work of pulling linen by the Council on the grounds of learning a useful craft. Actually, this work has no education at all. It is only one of the means for the workhouse to make profits. After Oliver made such a big mistake of “blaspheming God” as adding porridge, he was locked up in a small black room, had a body purification ceremony in the cold, and was repeatedly whipped by the parish officer, but these abuses were regarded as a gift to Oliver (Cheng Lijun, 2017).

4. Studies on the Author Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist not only reveals the hypocrisy of the cause of poverty relief in Britain in the 19th century, but also focuses on the kind-hearted people experienced in Oliver’s growth experience. The goodwill of those partners who are also in distress, as well as the great sympathy and selfless assistance from those rich people who are in a rich situation to Oliver’s tragic experience, are the reflection of the author’s charity thought. In his opinion, the idea of “charity is mutual assistance” is an indispensable part of British relief.

4.1 Charitable Help from the Rich

Charity has always been a tradition of the British middle class, and Victorian Britons equated private relief with a major charity of workhouse relief (Wu Wenquan, Gao Xianming, 2020). Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Maylie in the novel are entrusted with Dickens’s beautiful fantasy of the “benevolent” bourgeoisie. At the beginning of the court, Mr. Brownlow thought that even if little Oliver really stole his things, he would ask the judge to give him a lighter sentence. After the trial, he took Oliver to his home to take good care of him. Similarly, Mrs. Maylie is kind-hearted. Mrs. Maylie, Miss Rose and the doctor saved Oliver and moved to a country villa. There, they enjoy the beauty of natural scenery. These quiet days had never been experienced by Oliver. This kind of charity spirit from great personality is the author’s yearning and expectation.

Dickens believed that human nature is good, love can change everything, and there will be a pure spring in the depths of human heart. He used his naive optimism philosophy to solve the social dark side shown in the book one by one, and vigorously promoted the humanitarian spirit (Zou Hongxia, 2018). At the end of the novel, Dickens wrote: "without strong affection and humanity of heart and gratitude to that being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attribute is Benevolence to all things that breathe, happiness can never be attained." (Dickens, 365) Dickens' charity is a multi charity model, in which the giver gives generously, the recipient is grateful for help and self-reliance, and the partners support each other (Wu Wenquan, Gao Xianming, 2020).

4.2 Mutual Assistance Among the Poor

Charity is not only reflected in the rich, but also in the poor in a difficult situation. Dick, another miserable orphan in the workhouse, is such a noble man. Dick knew the darkness of the workhouse and sent blessings to Oliver who was lucky to escape. "Goodbye, dear Oliver! God bless you!" (Dickens, 90) For the first time in Oliver's life, he was blessed by others-from a child who was also suffering and even younger than him. They are all very poor children. In this indifferent world, they are the warmth of each other. On the way to London, a kind tax collector gave him bread and cheese; an old lady gave him the only thing she could get out. These ordinary and even poor people gave Oliver goodwill, hope and the courage to move on. From then on, even though life was full of difficulties, he always remembered the kindness.

The charity idea conveyed by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* is not a compulsory obligation for upper class people to do good, but a "more universal religious love, a love for God and neighbors" (Walder, 1993:516). Christians believe that "even in the most degenerate corner, there is a flicker of divinity." This divinity is evident in Nancy. She is also an orphan, spoiled by thieves and in love with a robber. Later, her kindness was lit up. In order to protect Oliver, she was beaten to death by her lover, and Oliver was really saved (Li Yun, 2016). Charity, with a strong religious sense in Nancy, is rewarded in the form of "Providence," flashing the color of great martyrs.

5. Conclusion

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens depicts selfish and greedy petty bourgeois officials, violent and terrorist robbers and criminals, and reveals the inherent exploitation and hypocrisy of capitalist society and the root of the miserable life of the poor. At the same time, he also painted another picture, in which kind-hearted people finally live a happy life in the beautiful rural world, reflecting people's vision of beauty, and goodness finally defeats evil.

The reform of the British poverty relief system in the 19th century was hypocritical and ferocious. As Dickens described in *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse was obviously "the Bastille of the poor." The poverty relief law puts the shackles of "poverty is crime" on the poor, and the poverty relief officials take it for granted that "poverty relief is exploitation" in the process of poverty relief. As a public charity system, it is undoubtedly a failure. In addition to the profound criticism, the author also

expressed his yearning for the model of mutual assistance and charity. The help from the great personality and the mutual support of the poor are the charity model that the author most looks forward to.

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