



## Bourgeois Humanitarianism: A Brief Study of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

HAO Yu<sup>[a],\*</sup>; CHI Ren<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

As a novel written with sorrow and concern, *A Tale of Two Cities* exposed the inhumanity of aristocrats, showed sympathy for the miserable life of the oppressed, expressed contradictory ideas about mass revolution, and advocated solving the problem with benevolent spirit and forgiveness. Vividly described characters and various writing devices enabled the author, Dickens to fully express bourgeois humanitarianism in his own way. The bourgeois humanitarianism he held in ideology led to reluctance for vehement rebellion and support for moderate reformism in politics. Throughout the book he tried to remind the ruling class not to oppress the common people too harsh, and the public not to resort to violence. As a representative of bourgeois humanitarianism, Charles' humanitarianism also plays a role in the modern bourgeois societies and provides a living example for us to understand the nature of bourgeoisie.

**Key words:** Bourgeois humanitarianism; *A Tale of Two Cities*; Sympathy; Contradictory ideas;

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### INTRODUCTION

Humanitarianism has always been a heatedly debated topic throughout history, whether in the field of politics or in the field of literature. In fact, quite a few writers have revealed their own understandings toward

humanitarianism in their works. *A Tale of Two Cities*, written by Charles Dickens in 1859, is one of the classics that mirror western bourgeois humanitarianism. With his mighty pen, the author exposed the inhumanity of the aristocrats and expressed his sympathy for the oppressed. He held contradictory views toward mass revolution, on one hand justifying the cause, and on the other hand reproaching the outrageous violence and fierce revenge, and called for benevolent spirit as the solution. His ideas constituted the bourgeois humanitarianism.

Formed in Renaissance, aimed to serve as a sharp weapon to fight against feudalism, bourgeois humanitarianism gained the essence of ancient Greek humanitarianism, acclaiming that man should pursue their own happiness and break through the restraint of religious doctrines. During the Enlightenment movement, many philosophers advocated that the pursuit of one's interest should be controlled by law. The concept saw man as natural person free from any class, which was truly unrealistic. Because of such kind of idea, the inhumanity of the aristocrats and the miserable life of the oppressed made the author believe that it was justified for people at the bottom of the society to fight against the aristocrats for their basic rights. But when the time finally came, Dickens sensed the flame of revenge and violence, resulting in his fear for the distorted soul and his idea that benevolence and forgiveness were the solution for this bizarre world. Bourgeois humanitarianism was profoundly conveyed by the author's delicate and wonderful portrayal of characters and well-chosen diction. Strong in criticizing the dark side of the society, the denial of violence in breaking down the old corrupt system appeared to be weak and feeble.

### 1. EXPOSURE TO THE INHUMANITY OF ARISTOCRATS

As a fierce weapon, bourgeois humanitarianism exposed the inhumanity of aristocrats and the contemporary

society. The story began on a bleak Friday night late in November. The bleak ambiance haunted throughout the novel may send a shiver to every reader. The Gothic atmosphere was quite different from the comic diction and description noted in Dickens' previous novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The depressed voice was the result of the tyranny and inhumanity of the aristocrats, which afflicted the world into a living hell.

In 1859, the Industrial Revolution was already in full swing. Through plundering in the colonial territories, mass production and continuous accumulation of capital, the whole Britain became prosper day by day. People assumed that they were living in the golden age, when everything of the utmost use had been invented. Aristocrats of higher class began to indulge themselves in every possible way. Acting like the king of the world, they never regarded peasants and servants to be human, just referring to them as "common dogs" and "savages". In this novel, their ugly features and evil hearts are exposed with hatred by the author.

The life those noble people lived was extremely extravagant. Monseigneur could not get his morning chocolate into his throat without the aid of four strong men besides the cook. The way they lived and dressed was a way of maintaining the order of the day, strictly distinguishing them from the common people. With flowery words, Dickens presented a picture of luxurious life. As a humanist, he deeply resented the indulgence.

Beneath the splendor, these aristocrats not only showed little mercy and love for other people in poverty, but also exert themselves in making their life more miserable. Numerous taxes thrust to the bosom of every peasant like a piercing spear, yet they thought the peasants were just making up excuses to postpone the payment. In their minds, the death of a forester and the emaciated figure of a poor young mother had nothing to do with them. Dickens exaggerated a little bit in exposing the inhumanity. Bourgeois humanitarianism emphasized each individual's enjoyment in earthly happiness, criticizing all crimes against humanity. Though the descriptions were fictional, the author vividly conveyed his hatred.

Under the administration of the higher class, the whole society saw no hope in the future. Military officers were destitute of military knowledge; naval officers had no idea of a ship; civil officers made no notion of affairs. Bribery and flattery, the only methods they would use to get the posts, were employed by everyone who was ambitious enough. The ball held by the Monseigneur was a miniature of the contemporary upper class. Everyone attended for his own benefits. Everyone acted like a buffoon, jumping, smiling and making jokes to entertain their patrons. The light diction Dickens added vividly exposed the ugly behaviors. Men didn't say what's truly in their hearts. Being polite and friendly on the outside, the smile on one's face could turn into a fatal knife.

While resenting the aristocrats, Dickens also saw the

indifference of capitalism. Tellson's Bank by Temple Bar was described as "very small, very dark, very ugly, very incommensurable", resembling any notorious prison, showing its indifferent and scary countenance to every client. It was a world of money and power, not a world of love and truth. A lawyer of great talents like Sydney Carton, who was forced to serve Mr. Stryver, could not make a living by applying his real knowledge for he was in contempt for being associated with the hypocrites. The sympathy the author showed to Sydney Carton bore his hatred for the corrupt society.

With aristocrats and bourgeoisies being the ruling class of his time, Dickens showed little fear in exposing their wrong doings. He saw no humanity existing in the society. Hatred for exploitation and oppression was an indispensable part in bourgeois humanitarianism. With the mighty weapon, Dickens launched a forceful attack on the corrupt society.

## 2. SYMPATHY FOR THE MISERABLE LIFE

In contrast to the luxurious life of the upper class was the miserable life of the impoverished peasants, which deeply struck Dickens' heart. Dickens deliberately put together pictures of these two worlds that were as far apart as heaven and earth to demonstrate the sharp social conflict that would inevitably one day led to mass revolution. Beneath superficial prosperity lay grievous discontentment and crisis.

The village described in the novel had its one "poor street, with its poor brewery, poor tannery, poor tavern, poor stable-yard for relays of post-horses, poor fountain, all usual poor appointments. It had its poor people too." The repetition of the word "poor", which appeared to be the only suitable adjective, emphasized the terrible condition. The choices for the adults on earth were simple—whether to lead a life on the lowest terms that could sustain it, or be captivated and then die in the dominant prison. The village, light-headed with famine, fire, and bell-ringing, brimmed with sympathy and compassion of the author. The author personified "hunger", imagining it running wildly along the streets, resting on every countenance, inscribed on every bread shelf in the store. Through such description, the reader could almost see people shivering in the streets and smell the stink. With depressing tone hardly seen in his previous works, and his usual imagination, Dickens presented the prospect of a horrible living hell, infused with tragedy, tear, fear, and revenge.

All this resulted from the outrages of the upper class. The continuous numerous taxes were like the whip in the hand of the carriage driver, whirling furiously like a snake and constantly beat the poor villagers to death. There were no justice and law in the country. A murderer and a chief guilty for stealing 5 shillings were all sentenced to death, and heaven knows whether they really had committed

the crimes. Even if one didn't die in the prison, constant robbery and raid were too much for them to handle.

The life of humble peasants were described with great artistic skills, and yet true to life. In humanists' mind, the pursuit of happiness was men's natural rights and cause of social development. The frightening childhood memories strengthened Dickens' belief that people had the right to get rid of fetters and live a happy life. Through the eyes of the common people, Dickens foresaw the germ of revolution.

### 3. CONTRADICTIONARY VIEWS TOWARD MASS REVOLUTION

Having seen the viciousness of upper class and the miserable life of the poor, Dickens sensed the revolution was coming. The heavy storm with thunderbolt and lightning was the symbol of the great crowd of people with its rush and roar, bearing down upon the whole country. However, his views towards mass revolution were contradictory. Based on humanitarianism, Dickens' hatred and sympathy made him admit that people were right to launch the revolution. But with the penetration of the revolution, outrageous violence and furious people made him change his mind, describing revolutionaries as "demons".

It is believed that Dickens got many of his ideas about the French Revolution by a book called *The French Revolution* written by Thomas Carlyle. He asserted justice and democracy demonstrated in the process. The common people risked their lives for the smash of the old French feudal system and the realization of "liberty, equality, fraternity". The conquest of Bastille, the emblem of the corrupt old society, marked the end of an era.

Throughout the novel Dickens described the rebellion as ocean striking the bank. Again the author's imagination exaggerated the battlefield, and in this way it successfully conveyed the chaos in the turbulence. Everyone was brave. Men fired guns and fight with the imperial army, while woman held knives in their hands to defend themselves. Even though they died, they would be dying with honor and pride.

Dickens described the grand scenes of the revolution, depicting revolutionaries as brave warriors fighting for liberty. He found the cause of the revolution, but he disapproved the violence shown during the event. His description of the revolution didn't end up with merely ode to the war. After the rebellion he pushed the people's anger to the climax. The poisonous snakes of revenge grow inside everyone's body, making people do crazy things. The whirling grindstone, turned by two men with hideous countenances, represented a killing machine that was always ready to drink anyone's blood. The author referred to them as "ruffians", with their eyes and mouths resembling those of demons and devils. According to

Dickens, after the grand revolution, eleven hundred defenseless prisoners had been killed, and there was no legal procedure to decide whether they were really guilty or not. Neither pity nor peace existed. The self-appointed Tribunal would kill anyone who was assumed to be the enemy of the Republic. The dance to the popular revolution song was mere a storm of coarse red caps, a means of "angering the blood, bewildering the senses, and steeling the heart". Dickens was full of trepidation and fear for the accumulating revolutionary power. Under the concept of bourgeois humanitarianism, he believed that once the barbaric practice was encouraged, the whole country would be brought to the brink of anarchy and disorder. He reproached violence, overemphasizing revenge being the only aim of revolution. Killing and slaughter would destroy the human nature, leading to self-destruction. In the author's mind, violence could hurt the innocent, instead of reforming the society. Carton, Lucie and Darnay were hurt by the uncontrollable revolutionary power. The lonely and friendless sewing girl who upheld the revolution was a victim of the outrage. A world of red—red caps, red wine, red flame, and red blood—crawled all over the world, staining the sky and sending tremble and fear to the author's column.

In the revolution described in the novel, The Defarges, the Vengeance, and Jacques Three were major revolutionaries. Through Madam Defarge's misfortune Dickens condemned the upper class for their outrages, proclaiming that the inhuman reign provoked the fierce revolt of the oppressed. She lost her family due to Monsieur the Marquis' rime, and grew headstrong and determined. She was clever in dealing with the spy; she was brave in the battle; she always stood in the front line. Great sympathy was shown to this lady. But when the thought of revenge made her lose her sense and became a crazy bloodthirsty savage setting her mind to kill Darnay along with his family even though they had done nothing wrong, sympathy was retreated into doubt and disapproval. She kept knitting all the time, weaving her hope, hatred and crimes of aristocrats into her memory. No one could persuade her to stop. Her actions were understandable. Madam Defarge represented the thought of revenge in people's hearts. Through the depiction of this character one could sense the author's two-sided and contradictory contemplation of oppression and revolt.

The dance, guillotine, grindstone and the scary expression worn on the people's face may be exaggerated, but considering who Dickens was, the reason for such description may speak for itself. Not having seen the revolution with his own eyes, imagination and records of other people were all he had got in creating his major work. Such description served as a reminder to the dominator of what the world would be if they continued their wrong doings. Britain needed peace and quiet life, not violence and vehemence. As Dickens had mentioned in the public, the French Revolution served only as

the background to reflect the sharp class antagonism and violent class struggle, and he wanted to express something bigger and broader than a concrete event. In terms of revolution, bourgeois humanitarianism sank into a dilemma. On one hand, it justified revolution as a mean of fighting for one's happiness, and on the other hand it condemned revolution as a place for slaughter and killing. The contradictions in bourgeois humanitarianism appeared to be puzzled and weak in finding a way out. The exaggerated depiction of horror of the revolution was meant to warn everyone that bloodshed would not end up with peace, only love could save the day.

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#### 4. BENEVOLENT SPIRIT

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British critic George Orwell once commented that Dickens was always disposed to side with the disadvantaged people. Carrying this kind of thinking forward towards a logical conclusion, we can sense that once the disadvantaged side gained its success, Dickens would choose to support its enemies. Under the concept of bourgeois humanitarianism, conflicts should be solved with kindness and benevolence. The author set his mind against radical and revengeful revolution, which in his mind would not truly solve profound social problems.

In this novel praised to contain the "truth of God", to express the "conscience of the era", Dickens modeled ideal characters such as Lucie, Doctor Manette, Charles Darnay, Lorry and Sidney Carton. Through them, the author claimed love beyond the boundaries of class and hierarchy.

In views of the plot, Doctor Manette stood on the central spot. His story showed the reader the cruelty of the aristocrats, but instead of being punished with revolution, they should be conquered with love and harmony existed in people of all classes. There were good and bad people in every class, and they should never be judged according to one rule.

Doctor Manette's son-in-law Charles Darnay was an ideal character in the aristocrats. He believed that his family had done wrong, and were reaping the fruits of wrong. He tried to redress, showing mercy for the miserable people, and was tortured by seeking assistance and power in vain. Condemnation in words alone was not good enough for him. Practice was vital. He renounced his title and possession, and lived with another name in foreign county working as a teacher. The true value of a person did not consist in gaining happiness and enjoyment while sacrificing others' dignity and life. Bourgeois humanitarianism served as a weapon to vanquish the feudal system. As a traitor of the aristocracy, Darnay tried his best to live a different life. Dickens' hope was that all aristocrats would be aware of their wrong doings, and change the life they live. In his naive thinking, if everyone from the ruling class would care about the miserable life of common people and start showing mercy, the situation would be much better.

Of course the most ideal character was Sidney Carton. He was handsome, but he never cared what to wear; brilliant and intelligent, but willingly served as a jackal submitting to the vulgar royal lawyer Mr. Stryver; swart, but cared nothing about his future; sad and lonely, but passionate for his love. A lazy guy like him was not appreciated by the society. His love for Lucie was unconditional. Thinking that he could never give her true happiness, he chose to stay away, care for her with passion, and give her his word, that for her, and for any dear to her, he would do anything. His promise was that "If my career were of that better kind that there was any opportunity or capacity of sacrifice in it, I would embrace any sacrifice for you and for those dear to you", and her stuck to it to the end. For Lucie, he gave up his life for her husband and walked to the guillotine with smile on his face and peace in his heart. The love would move every young girl, but the author wanted to convey more than that. He repeated many times words from *The New Testament*, which reads "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." He meant to emphasize the eternity of Carton's love and sacrifice. His death was sublime and prophetic. Through it the author foresaw the "long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument, before it shall cease out of its present use." In Dickens' mind, violence from both the aristocrats and revolution should be abolished, for both would end up dead. Only Carton, incarnation of bourgeois benevolence and humanitarianism, could last forever. Being the character least true to the real world, Sidney Carton carried all the moralities Dickens thought everyone should possess.

Dickens once announced that his aim was to "join the two antagonistic sides, the aristocrats and the common people, together to eliminate the gap". Sincere and kind, however, his hope was based on unrealistic fantasies. Self-sacrifice could not ease the hurt, and waiting for aristocrats to convert was negative. Dickens failed to see that moderate reformism could not thoroughly perish the root of this corrupt society. Bourgeois humanitarianism saw each individual man as natural person, free from distinction of class, position and gender, while the concept itself was used to benefit the bourgeoisie. When the theory was used to solve problems in the real world, the solution was not as feasible as expected.

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#### CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, Dickens based bourgeois humanitarianism on humanity. He saw the sharp contrast between the aristocrats and common people, which gave him enough reasons to justify mass revolution. While at the same time, he strongly disapproved violent rebellion. He

depicted a magnificent picture of the time, imagining “benevolence” and “love” as mighty weapon to conquer “hatred”. He claimed reconciliation between antagonistic classes, for he advocated love for all human beings. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens fully expressed his bourgeois humanitarianism, criticizing the depressing reality and providing a lesson for the ruling class. He spent a lot of time and energy on this masterpiece, and the bourgeois humanitarianism it conveyed is worth analyzing by the people in the following generations.

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