

Poverty Narrative in *Nicholas Nickleby**

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Charles Dickens' novel *Nicholas Nickleby* depicts the life track of the protagonist Nickleby from the countryside to London, and takes the boarding school in Yorkshire as a sample to reflect the cruel living conditions of poor children in boarding schools. This paper intends to reveal the social realities by analyzing the survival dilemma of the poor, the abuse in boarding school, the mutual assistance and resistance to the oppressed people, in order to criticize the disadvantages of implement of *The Poor Law*, the construction of boarding school, which contains the thought of benevolence and resistance in Dickens's works.

Keywords: *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Poor Law*, benevolence and resistance

In the early 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was in the ascendant and the economy was prosperous. Britain became the world overlord. As Charles Dickens described, "This is a best time, this is the worst time". In the Enclosure Movement, the bourgeoisie made the poor lose their land and forced them to enter the bottom of the city through extortion. The Industrial Revolution intensified the contradiction between the rich and the poor in Britain. In order to alleviate social pressure, the British government issued *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act* (PLAA), which is known as the "new poverty law". The new poverty law has overcome some disadvantages in *The 1601 Poor Law Act*, but the two principles of "inspection by the workhouse" and "disposal of inferior" (Wu & Gao, 2020) have been branded with the early capitalist industrialization: In the face of profits and money, the bourgeois government is more vicious than the feudal autocratic government. The imperfect social system, the concept of making money first, and the solidified class structure make the life of the poor more difficult. These problems not only hindered the early Victorian reform, but also cast a shadow over the decline of the British Empire.

Nicholas Nickleby was published as a serial novel from March 1838 to September 1839. It not only coincides with the publication time of *Oliver Twist* in 1838, but also echoes each other in content. *Nicholas Nickleby* took place in the early 19th century. Nicholas, a country youth, through his experience from rural areas to cities, from poverty to well-off life, showed the urban-rural contradictions, class contradictions, and moral contradictions in British society. Finally, Dickens projected the concept of benevolence and the idea of resisting the oppressive class onto Nicholas, the hero, encouraged and affirmed the bright side of human nature, implied the germination of his socialist thought, and promoted the reform of social system in a practical sense.

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Utilitarian Concept on Helping the Poor: The Survival Dilemma of the Poor

The most fundamental change in the Victorian period was the transformation of the mode of production from agriculture to industry. In this process, poverty became one of the most important social problems in this period.

In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798, p. 33), Thomas Malthus believed that “the power of population proliferation is greater than the power of land to produce human means of living”. The lack of productivity and excess population make poverty inevitable (Liu, 1999, p. 86). Many middle and upper class people in Britain accepted Malthus’ theory as the theoretical basis for their handling of poverty.

John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher, psychologist, and economist, opposes the *Speenhamland System* and believes that charitable relief should not damage the spirit of personal self-help and the sense of self-reliance, distinguish between those who really need relief and those who do not, and force people without self-reliance motivation to accept labor.

In 1834, the Poverty Relief Committee held that limiting the population was to limit laziness and crime, and adopted the principles of “inferior disposal” and “workhouse inspection” to treat the poor in *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act*. Dickens was keenly aware that the principle of the new poverty relief law was to separate the poor from the pauper so as to prevent the impoverishment of the poor. At the same time, the poor should be separated from crime, so as to prevent those who are unable to support themselves from becoming a dangerous class. Nicholas lost their rural land due to the failure of speculation, and became poor after entering the city. Although they talked about going to charity organizations such as “work house, refugee shelter, or the hospital” for many times, they failed, not only because they did not meet the “workhouse test”, but once they entered the workhouse, they would become a dangerous class in the city, abandoned and isolated by the mainstream society.

Workhouse was regarded as “the Bastille of the poor” at that time. Dickens wrote in visiting the workhouse: “There are hungry babies everywhere, sick women in bed everywhere, noisy madmen everywhere, evil men waiting to eat, and dying old people are everywhere. This is what we saw during the two-hour visit” (Xue, 1994, p. 94).

Jeremy Bentham, an economist, established a utilitarian ethical system based on the principle of maximum happiness and effect theory. He believed that the utilitarianism of human behavior can be calculated, and the principle of good behavior is to see whether it can bring maximum happiness to most people. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), another representative of utilitarianism, developed utilitarianism and believed that the happiness of utilitarianism is the happiness for most people. When necessary, individuals should sacrifice their own happiness for others. Dickens was keenly aware that utilitarianism, on the one hand, encouraged the world to keep forging ahead and created value for the society. On the other hand, it will cause conflicts with other people because of their interests and affect social harmony and stability. Ralph and other people are to incite the crowd to influence the legal provisions in order to gain profits.

Under the influence of utilitarianism, legal proposals and formulation did not follow the principle of seeking happiness for the public, but were manipulated by capital to seek the greatest interests. Throughout the 19th century, social wealth accumulated rapidly and massively in industrial production, but the population expansion caused considerable pressure on the distribution of social resources. In 1843, Thomas Carlyle put forward the question of the condition of England: “Britain is full of all kinds of wealth... But in the surplus,

people die of hunger” (Mommsen, 1981, p. 10). The “Matthew effect” intensifies, which resulted in all kinds of social problems, such as financial crimes, labor and capital conflicts, labor movements, and so on. Just as the *Communist Manifesto* said,

The bourgeoisie has destroyed all feudal, patriarchal and idyllic relations in places where it has already gained dominance. It has mercilessly cut off all kinds of feudal fetters that bind people to natural dignity. It makes people have no other connection except naked interests and ruthless cash transactions. (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, CPC Central Committee, 2009, p. 33)

The promulgation of *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act* is intended to promote the poor people living around the city (Zhang & Wu, 2021, p. 114). However, the new poverty law completely focuses on “punishment”, requiring that all poor people who want to get relief must enter the workhouse to get relief.

The Prison for Foundling and Aphasic Poor

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault regards Mettray Penal Colony as the most extreme and typical discipline institution that uses “surveillance-punishment-discipline-collusion” in monasteries, prisons, corps, schools, factories, and other places. The discipline mechanism of the poverty school adopts the method of taming the body of the bottom students and monitoring individuals with discipline, so as to control and oppress the poor students.

At the end of the 18th century, the discipline mechanism spread throughout the whole social body, thus forming a “prison island” and a “discipline society”. Dickens said in *David Copperfield* (2011, p. 98) that “school is the epitome of society”. By implication, the management system and mode of the poverty school for students is the way the poverty hospital treats the poor at the bottom, and it is also the reflection of the bourgeoisie’s oppression of the people at the bottom.

In 1834, the parliament passed *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act*, which eliminated domestic relief by adopting the “workhouse test” and changed it to that the relief recipients must be poor people who are taken in to engage in hard labor in the Institute. However, it is still a blank whether children who have not entered the workhouse can engage in hard labor and be treated as poor people. This loophole allows people with ulterior motives to set up schools and factories for the poor in various names, while taking out relief funds and exploiting poor children. Schools should have been run for the poor, with the tacit consent of the government eager for quick success and instant benefit, and have actually become places for exploiting and oppressing classes for personal benefits.

Foucault believes that “the body is basically intervened by power and domination as a productive force; on the other hand, it can form a labor force only when it is controlled by a certain conquering system” (2012, p. 26). Through a whole set of punishment systems, such as: time (late, absent, interrupted, running away), activities (absent-minded, negligent, lack of enthusiasm), behavior (disrespectful, disobedient), speech (chatting, slow), body (incorrect posture, irregular posture, untidy) to punish poor students: fine, whip, solitary confinement, classification of shame levels, make them conform to the same model. Learn to “obey, tame, concentrate on learning and practicing, correctly perform duties and observe various disciplines”.

Dickens revealed the reality of child abuse in “charitable” poor schools by describing the aphasia of children in poor schools. Faced with the principal who is in charge of the fate of the poor children, the lives of the students in the poverty relief school are insignificant. They have no chance to defend and speak. They can only endure flogging and torture and wait for death.

Under the influence of the new poverty law, the behavior and activities of the poor at the bottom are controlled through the establishment of schools, homes, and factories for the poor, so as to build a series of auxiliary facilities around them and confine them in a fixed space. At the same time, it helps to deeply monitor the parents behind the children at the bottom and form a “prison continuum”. With the continuous strengthening of each link, the society generally has the idea of strict exclusion and monitoring and isolation of the poor at the bottom. The new poverty relief law and the establishment of the “prison islands” have further strengthened the concept that “poverty is a crime” to the public.

Foucault believes that “Discourse” means that a social group spreads its meaning to the society in a certain routine, so as to establish its social status, which is recognized and formed by other groups (Foucault, 2012, p. 26). Some of the poor people in Victorian society at that time came from the landless farmers after the Enclosure movement, some were agricultural workers who could not adapt to industrial cities, and some were naturally unable to work and migrant people. They constituted the most “Marginal people” and “Aphasia” in the bottom society of the Victorian era. The poor is excluded by the mainstream society and isolated by the normal people. Their large number is ignored. Their aphasia is a metaphor and silent cry for the suffering and fate of the poor at the bottom.

In Zhou Lengjia’s “On Dickens”, he evaluated Dickens as “the first person to move the British inferior society into the novel” (Zhang, 2015, p. 82); he pointed out that Dickens,

he creates gentle and smooth pages with great compassion and human love with his special kindness, what he can most capture the heartstrings of readers and move people is that the people and things in the lower society he writes are always in the most miserable and difficult lives and the most tortuous circumstances, but still have a pure soul and a good mood. This great description of human nature is the one that most resonates with us. (Zhang, 2015, p. 82)

Charity and Punishment Relief: The Sprout of Socialist Thought

In 1601, Britain promulgated *The Elizabethan Poor Law* (The Old Poor Law). *The Elizabethan Poor Law* complemented each other with charity and punishment. In a proposal to provide more effective relief to the poor, it is proposed to set up two different relief institutions. One is to set workhouses, which is mainly aimed at the hard-working people, and in which a relief center for the sick and the elderly is built; one is a reformatory school for refugees. There are dungeons and fasting workshops next to the dormitories and workshops of the reformatory school. Business workers can enter the county workhouse and provide work relief for them. However, the rules of the workhouse should be so strict that no one is willing to enter the workhouse to receive relief (Ding, 2014, p. 99).

The Elizabethan Poor Law was applicable to the agricultural society in Britain. Its original intention was to fix the poor and the poor in their parishes to avoid social unrest caused by the movement of the poor. At the same time, people receiving relief must wear signs. Except for begging at the specified time and in the specified area, other begging activities are prohibited, or the relief fund will be canceled.

Dickens’ experience of poverty in his youth prompted him to record the life of the people at the bottom throughout his life, and supported charity to help the poor. In the Victorian period, the middle class, at the call of the government and society, resolved social contradictions by setting up charities and carrying out religious activities, while showing the middle class’s sense of social responsibility and noble virtue. Dickens, as a middle class, believed in Christianity and accepted the spirit of equality, love, and redemption advocated by Christianity. In the face of social contradictions, he drew the public’s attention to the poverty relief law, the

educational system, and the judicial system. He preached mildly and took his works as the banner of moral culture, so that the society could pay more attention to the living conditions of the poor and let more poor people share the fruits of the Industrial revolution to the greatest extent.

Dickens, as a middle class, poured his views into his works. On the one hand, his benevolence is manifested in his sympathy and concern for the poor people, reflecting the selflessness, love, and family affection generally lacking in the middle and upper classes on the poor people, and affirming the truth, goodness, and beauty in human nature. On the other hand, Dickens advocated resolving contradictions and conflicts with the heart of “benevolence” and “altruism”, resolutely opposed the act of “fighting violence with violence” and the thorough, old-fashioned, and new-style retaliatory revolution, and believed that that would not really solve the deep-seated problems of society, but would only result in the attack of hatred.

Due to the class and era limitations, Dickens, as a novelist, can only show the disadvantages of the society at that time as much as possible, and cannot raise the exploitative nature of the capitalist system and its development law to a theoretical level. Therefore, Dickens hopes to eliminate the evils caused by the capitalist system of helping the poor. Instead of overthrowing the capitalist system itself, Dickens hopes to morally expose the ills of the capitalist society and design a blueprint for the future society. At the same time, Dickens hopes that both urban and rural sides and the poor and the rich can reach a reconciliation.

Facing the problem of social poverty, Dickens’ appeal for love can only be a poor prescription for capitalist society. His humanitarian criticism has necessary ethical value, but from the perspective of philosophical criticism, he has the immaturity of Utopian socialism and has not yet risen to the height of real socialism.

Based on the social division of labor and people’s value choice, Dickens could not have the critical ability of philosophical thinking and political economy like Karl Heinrich Marx. But as in *A Tale of Two Cities*,

Even if a similar hammer is used to smash a human being into shape, he will still grow back to his suffering appearance. As long as the seeds of violence and oppression and bullying are planted, they will inevitably bear the fruits of violence and oppression and bullying. (Dickens, 2014, p. 44)

This proves that no matter Marx, the Utopian socialists at that time or the writers have formed an invisible alliance to criticize the social system of capitalism, they should be respected and recognized.

Conclusion

Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* shows the plight of the poor who lost their rural land and entered the bottom of the city under the social transformation in the Victorian period. Under *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act*, they not only suffer from the spatial isolation of “inferior disposal” and “workhouse inspection”, but also suffer from the oppression of inequality in law, economy, education, and survival. The uneven distribution of social wealth exacerbated the “Matthew effect”, which triggered a series of social problems and became the shadow of the rise of Britain.

The government’s quick success and instant benefit in helping the poor has directly affected the survival of poor children. The poverty school that should have been built for poor children has become a quasi prison, allowing speculators to continuously squeeze children in school construction, management, and other aspects, making them lose their voice and become “silent victims”. Based on the concept of benevolence, Dickens supported charity to help the poor, and encouraged the poor to save themselves and help each other in a

humanitarian way. At the same time, Dickens criticized the indifference and cruelty of the oppressors, the corruption of the judiciary, the inaction of the bureaucracy, and the hierarchical barriers to education. His thought has the characteristics of Utopian socialism. Compared with the middle class of the same era, Dickens' concern and exposure of social problems exceeded his class, constantly guided people to understand and pay attention to the current situation of the bottom life, prompted the British government to amend *The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act* and the education act, and played a role in promoting social reform and promoting people to be good.

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