

Psychological Framework in Dickensian Realism: A Case Study of “The Signalman”

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Abstract

The present paper argues that the absurdities in Dickens’s works are highly psychologically symbolic. By exploring further the psychological mechanism in G. H. Lewes’s illustration of the “poetry” of the real, I try to reveal the nature of reality in Dickens’s works and describe the peculiarly psychological mode of Dickensian realism, as seen in the short story “The Signalman.” The trinity pattern of characterization of the narrator, signalman, and spectre is highly psychological, which may be regarded as consciousness, subject, and unconsciousness respectively. Thus, the story, psychologically speaking, is a revelation of an anxious mentality, embodied by the signalman while “I” and the spectre represent his own conscious and unconscious struggles for survival.

Key words: Charles dickens; “The signalman”; Psychological framework

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It has been widely recognized that “Dickens’s realism balances the mundane, unromantic aspects of life with the absurdities we so often overlook” (Tsudama, p.160). The plots in some of Charles Dickens’s works, characterized by unexplainable coincidental events, are strange and unconventional, defying reason or common sense. Some scholars regard the techniques of realistic portrayal in Dickens’s works as being modeled on “visual

representation.” G. H. Lewes, in particular, assumes that “the ‘real’ is equivalent to the visible,” and he divides the “representable artistic ‘real’” in Dickens’s works into physically “external reality” and “certain invisible reflexes of human sympathy... being identified as the ‘poetry’ of the real.” (Lew, pp.55-56) The present paper argues that the absurdities in Dickens’s works are highly psychologically symbolic. By exploring further the psychological mechanism in Lewes’s illustration of the “poetry” of the real, I try to reveal the nature of reality in Dickens’s works and describe the peculiarly psychological mode of Dickensian realism, as seen in the short story “The Signalman.”

In the preface to *Bleak House*, Dickens writes, “I have purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things” (Dickens, *Bleak*, p.6). Accordingly, “The Signalman” infuses the “romantic” elements in the “familiar” framework of the story, in which the latter constitutes the realistic tale as well as the target of Dickens’s critique of the Industrial Revolution. The “romance” here is tinged with a bleak feature since the short story itself aims to criticize the Industrial Revolution by portraying the mental distortion of the signalman.

Structurally speaking, as commented by Glancy, “Dickens’s framework and tale were wholly interdependent, illustrating and explaining each other” (Glancy, p.65). Accordingly, the framework and tale of “The Signalman” are psychological and realistic respectively. The reality in “The Signalman” combines the physical reality depicted by the narrator “I” and the signalman’s psychological reality symbolized by the spectre. The two layers of reality are intertwined together. Upon closer examination, we may find that the physical realm, constructing the realistic tale, including setting, characters, and plot, consists of the content of the short story, which makes the short story a typical critically realistic one. Yet, what is unique in Dickensian realism is the psychological realm, which builds the symbolic

framework of the whole story. The realistic tale is attached to its psychologically symbolic framework, thus fashioning a peculiar interweaving mode of Dickensian realism. In other words, the short story is not a simple revelation of the death of a signalman, but rather a psychological revelation of his anxiety and mental struggle before his death.

In Dickens's mode of realism, "reality" consists of the two layers of perception and the boundary between the "familiar" and the "romantic" is blurred. By transgressing from the traditional "realistic realm," Dickens has enriched the notion of "reality" as a cognitive entity. Reality, according to Dickens, is far from being a purely objective field. Rather, it should be more accurately depicted as the combined notion consisting of the realistic object and subjective reception of it. It is only through the combination of the objective and subjective layers can we have a complete picture of truth. The blurred boundary leads to many puzzling techniques in terms of characterization and plot design in "The Signalman." Most puzzling are the coincidental designs of the short story. There seems to be so much similarity and connection among the three characters: the narrator, the signalman, and the spectre.

Firstly, the signalman cannot distinguish the narrator from the spectre because both of them utter the words "Halloa! Below there!" (Dickens, *Short Fiction*, p.41) Upon hearing narrator's words, the signalman, "instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting nearly over his head," "turned himself about, and looked down the Line." (Dickens, *Short Fiction*, p.41) He was even "doubtful" whether "I (the signalman) had seen you(the narrator) before" at the red light position, where he had seen the spectre.

Secondly, there exists an eerie familiarity between the narrator and the signalman as the narrator confesses "In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life" when they first met. What is puzzling here is a more semantic plausible expression should be "In him, I merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life"(Dickens, *Short Fiction*, p.42). The possibility of exchange of "I" and "him" is a textual trick pulled by Dickens, exhibiting the distortion of physical reality and hinting at the hypothesis that the narrator might be an alter ego of the signalman.

Lastly, the intimacy between the signalman and the spectre is also quite obvious as the latter tries twice to warn the signalman of the impending danger. However, what characterizes the spectre is not the supernatural power as readers would expect. Dickens does not turn the short story into a real "romantic" story in which the tragic signalman is saved by supernatural power. As mentioned earlier, tragedy is a necessity in Dickens's critical campaign against the inhumane alienation brought by the Industrial Revolution.

We may proceed from the uncanny intimacy among the three characters and examine how Dickens blurs the boundary between the "romantic" and "familiar" realms. Although Jill L. Matus has noticed the close ties among the characters by stating "the narrator, the signalman, the spectre, and the engine driver are all bound together in a series of overlapping occurrences and repeated occurrences and expressions" (Matus, p.432), a clearer illustration of the structural connection among them is necessary.

If we regard the short story as a holistic psychological entity, we may find that the trinity pattern of characterization of the narrator, signalman, and spectre is highly psychological, which may be regarded as consciousness, subject, and unconsciousness respectively. Thus, the story, psychologically speaking, is a revelation of an anxious mentality, embodied by the signalman while "I" and the spectre represent his own conscious and unconscious struggles for survival.

"I," as the narrator, stands for the signalman's conscious endeavor to get out of the depressing signal box. During their second meeting, the signalman behaved strangely by stretching out his hand and tried to touch the narrator several times. When the narrator talked with the signalman about the spectre, he kept "resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine, I (the narrator) showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight" (Dickens, *Short Fiction*, p.47). Also, in the following dialogue, the signalman kept touching the narrator "on the arm with his forefinger twice or thrice, giving a ghastly nod each time" (Dickens, *Short Fiction* 48). What the signalman wanted to check is whether the narrator is a real man or not. The gesture shows his inability of differentiating physical reality from his hallucination.

The spectre, symbolically speaking, embodies the unconscious foreboding of the signalman as well as the anxieties he has suffered during working in the limited area. As Glancy puts it, "the ghost is not only plausible but essential, the symbolic representation of the isolated man's destiny in the dungeonlike pit" (Glancy, p.72). Thus, it is not so important to argue whether the spectre is real or not, what matters is the signalman's hallucination, which is proof of his splintered psyche. What constitutes the common ground between the signalman and the spectre is vulnerability: while the former can do nothing but wailing "What can I do?" the latter fails to exhibit any substantial supernatural power except for an impotent premonition for the doomed future.

If we regard the narrator and spectre as the symbols of conscious and unconscious projection of the signalman's anxious mentality, we will have a more reasonable understanding of the failure of the narrator's help to get the signalman out of the signal box as well as the vulnerability of the spectre: it is the vulnerability of

the signalman himself that results in the previous two incidents because all the three characters are psychological symbols from ONE mind.

The story, then, by interweaving two layers of reality, exhibits Dickens's unique style of realism. It is not only a realistic depiction of a signalman's wretched life trapped in the material world, but also an in-depth symbolic revelation of the conflicts in the signalman's psyche.

In "The Signalman," Dickens expands the notion of reality by placing the mentally-splintered signalman and his hallucination within the realistic context of the narrator's observation. The inner psychological mechanism helps to build a logical connection between the unexplainable, weird characterization, and plot design. Moreover, the second psychological layer of reality makes the depiction more profound and impressive for readers, who will be impressed by the extraordinary treatment of ordinary affairs by figuring out the complexity of the realistic picture Dickens draws. Thus, readers may have a more direct perception of the anxiety and mental depression of the signalman.

The short story, whether as Dickens's personal recollection of the Staplehurst accident or a description of the "anxieties about the perils of high-speed rail way travel.....commonplace throughout the mid-Victorian era" (Pope, p.439), exhibits a Dickensian "sense of powerlessness at impending disaster" (Matus, p.414). For Dickens, ghost stories were illustrative of "particular states of mind and processes of the imagination" (Schlicke, p.249). By exploring the psychological depth in the realistic depiction, Dickens highlights the multi-dimensional facets of "truth" and brings to readers the

visions which are often unnoticed. In this sense, the psychological mechanism makes the seemingly unreal and unconventionally coincidental plots plausible, which has become the peculiar representational mode of Dickens's works. Characterized by his psychological extension, Dickens's mode of realism is broader and more flexible. This mode, compared with the traditional realistic portrait, is an adjustment of the notion of realism and is closer to the "truth" in reality.

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