

# A Comparative Analysis of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain

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**ABSTRACT.**As critical realism writers, Mark Twain and Dickens have many similarities in writing style and language style. To verify this point of view by comparing their works and analyzing the reasons for it in combination with their historical background and life experience will help deepen the understanding of critical realism literature and promote the study of comparative literature.

**KEYWORDS:** Comparative analysis, Critical realism, Charles dickens, Mark twain

## 1. Introduction

Critical realism is a literary trend of thought and creative method formed in Europe in the 19th century. Both Charles Dickens and Mark Twain are the representatives of critical realism literature in their own country, and they also play an important role in the history of literature. There are many similarities in their writing styles and language styles, which may be related to their similar historical background, life experience, and humanitarian spirit.

## 2. The Similarity of Their Writing Styles

### 2.1 Children's Perspective

Charles Dickens is known as one of the best writers who are good at reflecting life from the perspective of children. Children and childhood are the cores of his novel themes and artistic imagination.<sup>[1]</sup> He went on to write a series of child-centered novels, including *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and so on. Through these novels, we can find that Dickens' application of children's perspective transitioned from the third person to the first person. *Oliver Twists* is his representative work in the third person narrative stage, *Dombey and Son* is his representative work in the transition period, and *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* are his representative works in the first person stage.<sup>[2]</sup> Although Dickens' novels are not always narrated by children in the first person, many of them show the world through the eyes of children in either straightforward or subtle ways.

Mark Twain was also a writer who excelled at using children's perspectives. And the most successful images of children in the last two decades of the 19th century appeared in the United States, the two urchins that Mark Twain portrayed in his novels.<sup>[3]</sup> *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* are his magnum opus. In these works, Mark Twain reveals the backward bourgeois education and hypocritical religion through the adventures of children, who are naughty but very kind and brave. He was quite good at observing the problems of society from the children's point of view and delivering bitter satire.

It is worth noting that although the two writers are equally good at using children's perspectives. Most of the images of children in Dickens's works are poor children who live a hard life, while the images of children in Mark Twain's works are naughty, incompatible with the social system, but brave and upright.

## **2.2 Critical Realism**

Dickens and Mark Twain are both outstanding representatives of critical realism literature in the 19th century, and they are the founder of critical realism literature in their own countries.

It is well-known that Charles Dickens wrote his novels to reform a variety of problems in society.<sup>[4]</sup> *Oliver Twists* criticizes the inhumane institution of the workhouse and reveals the suffering of the people at the bottom of the society, *Dombey and Son* and *Great Expectations* reflect the corrosion of money to people's mind, *A tale of two cities* not only criticizes the evils of the upper class, but also warns of the potential problems brought about by the social revolution, and so on.

Twain is considered to be representative of American critical realism<sup>[5]</sup>. And his works are full of satire. In general, *The adventures of Tom Sawyer* describes the rigid and decadent education of the bourgeoisie, but at the end of the story, Tom caters to the general social standards, becomes a good child in the traditional sense, and suppresses the pursuit of freedom. To some extent, the death of an imaginative and freedom-loving soul makes everyone feel relieved, which is a heartless mockery of the education system. Besides, there are many ironic details in this story, for example, the headmaster always has a Bible in his hand for no reason. In these ways, Mark Twain severely criticizes American hypocritical politics, religion, and morality through writing.

## **2.3 Romantic Writing Style**

Although Dickens and Mark Twain are famous critical realism writers, their writing styles are very romantic. Both of them are good at exposing cruel reality with the romantic plot, and their writing styles are perfect combinations of romanticism and realism<sup>[6]</sup>.

Their works have an obvious romantic tendency. This kind of plot appears in the story of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Prince and the Pauper* that two people look

the same and exchange identities so that their fate changes. Such strange things with distinctive romantic features are impossible in real life, but this setting is a necessary prerequisite for these two stories. Besides, in their novels, the protagonists always encounter all kinds of adventures and coincidences. For example, Oliver, an orphan, is a child of a rich family. He happened to meet his father's close friend when he was stealing with the criminal group. The man was willing to take him in and also happened to have a picture of Oliver's mother, so he revealed Oliver's true identity at the end of the story. In the same way, Tom Sawyer witnessed a murder by accident, and then he was able to escape to a desert island at such a young age and return home successfully. He not only survived in the cave but also found the treasure. These plots all reflect their romantic writing style.

#### **2.4 Writing Styles Transition**

The writing styles of Dickens and Mark Twain went through the great transition from lightness and humor to heaviness and pessimism.

In the 1830s, Dickens' works generally criticized the reality mildly, and the endings of the stories were justice overcoming wickedness. In the 1840s, the works represented by *Dombey and Son* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* still emphasized the kindness of human nature, but the kindness did not necessarily overcome the evil. In the 1850s and 1860s, the optimism of Dickens' works was greatly weakened and the Pessimism became more and more obvious. Although the positive characters in the novel still have a good ending, they often have to pay a heavy price. Dickens felt more and more deeply that contradictions between different classes were difficult to reconcile, and his early writing style of humor and satire turned to be sentimental and sad.

At the end of the 19th century, American society changed to foreign aggression from liberal capitalism, and the pessimism and despair of Mark Twain's works also became obvious. The humor almost disappeared, while the criticism arising from angry, sad, and mournful emotional appeal became very strong, so some people said that in this period he has become a pessimist. The major works in this period are *Following the Equator*, *The Man That Corrupted Hadley burg*, *What is man*, and his posthumously published autobiography.<sup>[7]</sup> Although it is still controversial whether his later works are pessimistic or not, his thoughts and writing style certainly went through a transformation from relaxed and humorous to sad and world-weary.

### **3. The Similarity of Their Language Styles**

#### **3.1 Humor and Satire**

Both Dickens and Mark Twain have the language characteristics of humor and satire, and in this way, they criticize injustice and some disgusting people in society.

Dickens' works are very rich in language and he is called "the second

Shakespeare". A large number of words and various expressions enabled him to be humorous when he criticized reality. In *David Copperfield*, characters are portrayed in humorous language, and in *The Pickwick Papers*, each episode tells a humorous and meaningful story.

Humor and satire are used in the novels of Mark Twain, who mercilessly criticized and attacked the American society in the middle and late 19th century.<sup>[8]</sup> He believed that "humor for humor is not permanent", so the content of Mark Twain's novels is based on the social reality and shows a strong sense of social distress, and in his works, humor is always used to criticize society and human nature better.

### **3.2 Colloquialism**

Dickens and Mark Twain are good at describing ordinary people, and their early works are very humorous, so they often use colloquial language and slang in their works.

Dickens, as a popular writer, especially liked to use spoken language in his works, which makes the characters vivid and makes the readers feel friendly and interesting. He truly restored the character's accent and dialect and made everyone's language conform to their identity and experience.

Mark Twain's works are called rural literature, mainly because he used a large number of dialects in his works, most of which are humorous languages collected by him when he was wandering. He is also regarded as the founder of colloquial literature.

## **4. The Reason**

### **4.1 Historical Background**

Dickens and Mark Twain were born in Britain and America in the 19th century, and they lived in the same historical period.

Dickens lived and wrote in the early Victorian era. At that time, the British capitalist economy developed rapidly. With the economic prosperity, the class contradictions were gradually deepened. The ruling class was crazy about profits and tried to make a fortune, while the workers were unemployed and homeless.

Mark Twain lived in the period of American development from free capitalism to imperialism. At that time, great changes took place in American society. In his life, he experienced the slavery in the south, the territorial development in the west, the gold rush, the industrial revolution, and other major events. During this period, he increased his knowledge and ability and obtained a wealth of creative materials.

Dickens and Mark Twain lived in the same era. At that time, British society and

American society were experiencing the rapid development of capitalism and faced many similar social problems, such as the intensification of class contradictions, moral decline, etc. Therefore, as critical realism writers, they are inevitably similar to each other in their works.

#### ***4.2 Life Experience***

Dickens and Mark Twain not only lived in the same era but also had many similarities in their life experiences.

Charles John Huffam Dickens hailed from a poor family, and his father was jailed for debt. When he was young, he had to go to school intermittently because of his poor family. After that, he was forced to work as a child laborer in the factory. After the age of 15, he worked as an apprentice, recorder or court recorder in a law firm, then, he began to work as a newspaper interviewer at the age of 20, covering the House of Commons.

On November 30, 1835, Mark Twain was born into a family of poor lawyers in rural Florida, Missouri. He is the sixth of the seven children in the family. His father was a local lawyer with a small income. Mark Twain had to work when he was young. After his father died when he was eleven, he began his independent working life and tried to work as a printing apprentice, newspaper boy, typesetter, sailor, gold digger, journalist, etc.

Both of them were born into poor families, and they had a miserable childhood and several different working experiences. That enables them to deeply understand the hardships of the life of the people at the bottom of the society, to have deep sympathy for children, and to understand the real situation of all walks of life. As a result, they could criticize social injustice more accurately and profoundly.

#### ***4.3 Humanitarian Spirit***

Both Dickens and Mark Twain were kind and upright, so they have deep sympathy for the people at the bottom of the society and the vulnerable children, which can be called humanitarian spirit. This makes some of their works reflect similar central ideas.

The ideological content of Dickens' novels is rich and complex, but there are three basic aspects: Firstly, it is the critique of the Victorian capitalist society; Secondly, it is the promotion of ethics; Thirdly, it is the extensive and in-depth exploration of human nature, and behind these three aspects is the author's humanitarian thought.<sup>[9]</sup>

From the humanitarian standpoint, Mark Twain exposed the hypocrisy under the cover of American democracy and freedom, criticized the inherent social disadvantages of the United States as a developed capitalist country, such as racial discrimination, money worship, feudal autocracy, and expressed his yearning for the real sense of democracy and free life.

## 5. Conclusion

By comparing the works of these two writers, we can find that Dickens and Mark Twain have many similarities in writing style and language style. The reason may be that they have the same historical background and similar life experience. As the representative writers of critical realism, they have a great impact on later generations. They not only deeply criticized the social issues with their special writing style and language style but also made lots of people pay attention to the living conditions of vulnerable groups.

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