

Original Paper

Cultural Values of Life in Charles Dickens's and Lu Xun's Works: A Comparative Study

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Received: June 29, 2023

Accepted: July 7, 2023

Online Published: July 18, 2023

doi:10.22158/sll.v7n2p95

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v7n2p95>

Abstract

Dickens wrote during the Victorian era in England, a time of industrialization and social changes, while Lu Xun wrote during China's early 20th century, marked by political turmoil and the transition to modernity. The essay explores the socioeconomic backgrounds of the authors, the portrayal of characters and their struggles, the impact of industrialization and modernization, and the reflection of cultural values and morality. Despite the differences in time and place, both authors address social injustices, advocate for compassion, and challenge prevailing norms. Through their works, readers gain insights into the complexities of their respective eras, the universal human experiences, and the enduring relevance of their literary legacies. The comparative analysis sheds light on the cultural values that shaped their times and invites readers to reflect on the past in shaping a better future.

Keywords

Dickens, Lu Xun, Victorian era, industrialization, social changes, early 20th century, political turmoil, transition to modernity

1. Introduction

The literary works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun are renowned for their profound exploration of the human condition and their ability to capture the essence of their respective societies. Dickens, a prominent figure in Victorian England, and Lu Xun, a celebrated writer during China's tumultuous early 20th century, provide valuable insights into the cultural values and societal norms that shaped their times. This essay undertakes a comparative study of their works, delving into the nuanced similarities and differences between the eras in which they lived.

By examining the writings of Dickens and Lu Xun, we gain a deeper understanding of the social fabric and the intricate tapestry of human experiences during their respective periods. These authors offer

distinctive perspectives on the challenges, aspirations, and fundamental beliefs that shaped the lives of individuals in Victorian England and early 20th-century China.

Dickens' works vividly portray the rapidly changing landscape of Victorian society, which experienced a seismic shift due to industrialization and urbanization. The Industrial Revolution brought forth a wave of progress, economic growth, and technological advancements, but it also exposed the underbelly of society, rife with poverty, exploitation, and social inequality. Through memorable characters such as Oliver Twist, Ebenezer Scrooge, and Pip, Dickens shines a spotlight on the harsh realities faced by the lower classes and the struggles for social justice and compassion amidst a morally complex world.

In contrast, Lu Xun's writings emerged against the backdrop of a China grappling with political upheaval, cultural transformation, and foreign influence. The collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China marked a critical turning point in the country's history. Lu Xun's stories, essays, and satirical works unflinchingly critique the deep-rooted feudalism, the ossified educational system, and the oppressive social hierarchy that stifled individual freedoms. His characters, such as Ah Q, Kong Yiji, and the protagonists of "New Year's Sacrifice", embody the struggles of ordinary people seeking self-realization and grappling with the conflicts between tradition and modernity.

While Dickens and Lu Xun wrote in distinct cultural and historical contexts, their works share common thematic threads. Both authors tackled issues of social injustice, human suffering, and the yearning for a better society. They challenged prevailing norms and advocated for empathy, compassion, and the pursuit of moral integrity in the face of adversity. Through their literary masterpieces, Dickens and Lu Xun strove to capture the essence of the human spirit and provoke societal introspection.

By undertaking a comparative analysis of their times, we can delve deeper into the social, political, and economic factors that influenced the cultural values of life during the Victorian era in England and the early 20th century in China. This examination allows us to appreciate the unique challenges and aspirations faced by individuals in these societies and understand the lasting impact of these cultural values on subsequent generations.

In the following sections, we will explore key themes, such as social inequality, the impact of industrialization and modernization, and the reflections of cultural values and morality in the works of Dickens and Lu Xun. Through this comparative study, we aim to gain a richer perspective on the complexities of their respective eras, the universality of human experiences, and the enduring relevance of their literary legacies.

In this comparative study, we delve into the cultural values of life as portrayed in the works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun. By exploring their literary masterpieces, such as Dickens' "Great Expectations", "Oliver Twist", and Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman", "The True Story of Ah Q", we embark on a journey that transcends geographical boundaries, revealing the universal nature of human experiences.

Dickens, a prominent English writer of the Victorian era, witnessed firsthand the stark inequalities and

social injustices plaguing industrialized England. His works vividly depict the lives of marginalized individuals, exposing the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation, and class divide. Through compelling narratives and memorable characters, Dickens implores readers to question societal structures and advocate for compassion and empathy.

On the other hand, Lu Xun, hailed as the father of modern Chinese literature, emerged during a period of immense political and cultural upheaval in China. His writings emerged as a response to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent struggle for modernization and national identity. Lu Xun's works often explore themes of disillusionment, cultural stagnation, and the oppressive nature of tradition. His characters are confronted with dilemmas that challenge their beliefs, forcing them to confront the conflicts between tradition and progress.

By undertaking a comparative analysis of these two literary giants, we aim to unravel the cultural values of life embedded within their works. We will examine the ways in which Dickens and Lu Xun tackle issues of poverty, social inequality, the role of tradition, and the struggle for individual identity. Furthermore, we will explore the impact of their writings on their respective societies, considering how their messages reverberated across time and influenced subsequent generations.

Through this comparative study, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural contexts that shaped Dickens and Lu Xun's works and the enduring relevance of their narratives in our contemporary world. By examining the shared themes and distinct approaches of these authors, we can discern the universal human experiences that transcend time, culture, and borders. Ultimately, this study aims to illuminate the power of literature in reflecting and shaping cultural values, and the significance of these two literary giants in our global literary heritage.

2. The Comparison of the Socioeconomic Backgrounds

To fully comprehend the cultural values depicted in the works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun, it is essential to consider the stark socioeconomic backgrounds against which their writings emerged. Dickens wrote during the Victorian era, spanning from the early 19th century to the late 19th century, a time of significant transformation in England. This period witnessed the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of the British Empire.

Industrialization brought about profound changes in the socioeconomic landscape of Victorian England. The country experienced a shift from an agrarian-based economy to one centered around manufacturing and trade. Factories emerged, powered by steam engines, leading to mass production and the growth of urban areas. The Industrial Revolution fueled economic prosperity, particularly for the burgeoning middle class, but it also exacerbated social inequalities. The working class faced arduous labor conditions, low wages, and inadequate living standards. These societal divisions and the stark contrast between the privileged elite and the impoverished masses became central themes in Dickens' works.

On the other hand, Lu Xun wrote during a tumultuous period in China's history, the early 20th century. China was undergoing a profound transformation, transitioning from a feudal society to a modern nation. This era was marked by political turmoil, foreign invasions, and internal struggles. The collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent establishment of the Republic of China led to an intense period of introspection and reevaluation of traditional values.

China's encounter with Western powers, the Opium Wars, and the resulting unequal treaties further highlighted the need for reform and modernization. Lu Xun's writings emerged within this context of social, political, and cultural upheaval. He witnessed the decline of Confucian values, the erosion of traditional authority, and the rise of new ideas and ideologies that questioned established norms. Lu Xun's works reflect the dissonance between tradition and modernity and the challenges faced by individuals amidst these transitions.

While Dickens and Lu Xun wrote in different time periods and cultural settings, both authors grappled with the repercussions of societal changes brought about by industrialization and modernization. Their works serve as powerful commentaries on the social inequalities, injustices, and moral dilemmas that emerged during their respective eras. By comparing their socioeconomic backgrounds, we gain a deeper appreciation of the historical forces that shaped their literary landscapes and the cultural values of life as portrayed in their works.

3. Portrayal of Characters and their Struggles

The literary works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun are characterized by their richly developed characters, who serve as vessels for the struggles and challenges faced by individuals in their respective societies.

In Dickens' novels, protagonists such as Oliver Twist and Pip from "Great Expectations" navigate a world shaped by societal constraints and oppressive systems. Oliver Twist, for instance, endures the hardships of poverty, exploitation, and the corrupting influence of criminality in Victorian England. His journey represents the struggle of individuals born into unfavorable circumstances, fighting against the odds for a better life. Pip, on the other hand, grapples with his desires for social advancement and self-improvement, highlighting the complexities of class mobility and the pursuit of personal identity.

Dickens' characters often find themselves pitted against powerful antagonists who symbolize the social ills of their time. Figures like Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol" embody the greed and indifference of the wealthy elite, emphasizing the stark divide between the privileged and the impoverished. Through their struggles and interactions, Dickens exposes the injustices of society and advocates for empathy, compassion, and the recognition of shared humanity.

Similarly, Lu Xun's characters, such as Kong Yiji and Ah Q, confront a society grappling with prejudice, moral decay, and the burdens of traditional values in early 20th-century China. Kong Yiji, in "Kong Yiji", is a fallen scholar who experiences social rejection and deteriorates into a life of poverty

and ridicule. Through Kong's story, Lu Xun criticizes the hierarchical examination system and exposes the hypocrisy and callousness of the elite class.

Ah Q, the iconic character from "The True Story of Ah Q", embodies the self-deception, delusion, and moral ambiguity prevalent in Chinese society at the time. Ah Q's constant reliance on self-affirmation and his refusal to confront the realities of his situation serve as a critique of the individual's inability to effect meaningful change in a society plagued by deep-rooted problems.

Through their characters' struggles, both Dickens and Lu Xun shed light on the larger societal issues and moral dilemmas of their times. Their works reflect the resilience, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of individuals navigating complex social landscapes. By capturing the triumphs and tribulations of their protagonists, these authors encourage readers to empathize with the marginalized, question the prevailing norms, and envision a more just and compassionate society.

In exploring the portrayal of characters and their struggles in the works of Dickens and Lu Xun, we gain a profound understanding of the human condition and the shared experiences of individuals amidst the challenges and injustices of their respective societies.

4. Impact of Industrialization and Modernization

The impact of industrialization and modernization is a significant theme in the works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun, reflecting the profound changes occurring in their respective societies.

In Victorian England, the advent of industrialization brought about a rapid transformation in social structures and urban landscapes. The rise of factories, steam-powered machinery, and mass production spurred urbanization, drawing large populations to cities in search of employment opportunities. The once predominantly agrarian society shifted toward an industrial economy, resulting in the growth of the middle class and the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Dickens vividly captures the consequences of these changes in his works. He exposes the harsh realities faced by the working class, highlighting their exploitation, deplorable living conditions, and the impact of unchecked capitalism. The plight of characters like Oliver Twist or the residents of Coketown in "Hard Times" reflects the social injustices and human suffering resulting from the industrial revolution. Through his writings, Dickens calls for reform, compassion, and a recognition of the inherent worth of every individual.

Similarly, Lu Xun's China was undergoing its own process of modernization during the early 20th century. The country faced internal struggles, political upheaval, and external pressures from Western powers. The clash between tradition and modernity became a central theme in Lu Xun's works, as he grappled with the consequences of China's attempts to adopt Western ideas and technology.

Lu Xun's writings explore the conflicts and tensions arising from the collision of traditional values and the forces of modernization. He critiques the ossified educational system, the oppressive social hierarchy, and the stagnation caused by adherence to outdated customs. Characters in his stories, such

as Kong Yiji or the protagonists of “New Year’s Sacrifice”, face moral dilemmas and confront the challenges of navigating a changing society.

Both authors provide valuable insights into the human costs and the moral implications of rapid societal transformations. They highlight the displacement, dislocation, and the erosion of traditional values resulting from industrialization and modernization. Their works serve as cautionary tales, urging readers to consider the consequences of progress and advocate for a balance between material advancement and the preservation of human dignity.

Through their exploration of the impact of industrialization and modernization, Dickens and Lu Xun provide powerful commentaries on the social, economic, and moral dimensions of their respective eras. They encourage readers to critically reflect on the complexities of progress and strive for a society that upholds human values amidst the ever-changing landscape of technological advancement.

5. Reflection of Cultural Values and Morality

The works of Charles Dickens and Lu Xun provide profound reflections on the cultural values and moral dilemmas that shaped their respective societies. While they address similar themes of compassion, social responsibility, and the fight against injustice, their writings also reveal nuanced differences influenced by the cultural contexts in which they lived.

Dickens, as a writer of Victorian England, placed a strong emphasis on moral integrity and the need for societal reform. His works championed the values of compassion and empathy, particularly towards the marginalized and oppressed. Through characters like Sydney Carton in “A Tale of Two Cities” or Little Nell in “The Old Curiosity Shop”, Dickens portrays individuals who embody selflessness, resilience, and a commitment to doing what is right. Dickens’ exploration of social class divisions, poverty, and the consequences of greed shed light on the moral failings of Victorian society while calling for compassion and social responsibility.

Lu Xun, writing in the early 20th century during China’s transition from feudalism to a modern society, placed a significant emphasis on individualism, intellectual awakening, and the rejuvenation of the nation. Lu Xun’s works reflect his deep concern for the moral decay and intellectual stagnation he perceived in Chinese society. Characters such as Ah Q and Kong Yiji grapple with personal and societal struggles, reflecting the need for individual transformation and the reevaluation of traditional values. Lu Xun’s writings call for intellectual enlightenment, critical thinking, and the rejection of oppressive systems as pathways towards social and national rejuvenation.

While Dickens’ focus primarily centered on the individual’s struggle against social injustice and the importance of personal morality, Lu Xun’s writings expanded to encompass the broader social and political landscape of China. He sought to awaken a collective consciousness and inspire his readers to confront the moral dilemmas facing their society.

Both Dickens and Lu Xun challenged the prevailing cultural norms of their times through their writings.

They confronted the contradictions, hypocrisies, and moral complexities present in their societies, urging readers to reflect on the deeper human values necessary for a just and compassionate world.

By examining the cultural values and moral dilemmas reflected in their works, we gain insights into the concerns and aspirations of individuals in Victorian England and early 20th-century China. Dickens and Lu Xun remind us of the enduring importance of compassion, social responsibility, and the continuous quest for personal and societal morality in the face of social, political, and cultural challenges.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Charles Dickens' works in Victorian England and Lu Xun's writings during the early 20th century in China illuminates the cultural values and life experiences of their respective eras. Through their literary masterpieces, both authors delve into the complexities of society, offering profound insights into the struggles, injustices, and moral dilemmas faced by individuals.

Despite the geographical and temporal differences between Dickens and Lu Xun, their works reveal striking similarities in their concerns and aspirations. Both authors share a deep commitment to exposing social injustices and advocating for compassion, empathy, and social responsibility. Their writings serve as powerful critiques of the prevailing societal norms and call for moral rectitude in the face of adversity.

Dickens' Victorian England, shaped by industrialization and rapid social changes, witnessed the rise of the middle class, but also intensified social inequalities. Lu Xun's China was undergoing its own modernization process, marked by political turmoil and a clash between tradition and modernity. Through their works, Dickens and Lu Xun navigate these transformative periods, reflecting the impact of industrialization, urbanization, and the clash of cultural values.

Examining their portrayal of characters and their struggles, we gain a profound understanding of the human condition amidst societal challenges. Both authors emphasize the resilience, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of individuals navigating complex social landscapes, urging readers to empathize with the marginalized and question established norms.

Moreover, Dickens and Lu Xun reflect the cultural values and moral dilemmas prevalent during their times. Dickens champions compassion, social responsibility, and the fight against injustice, highlighting the need for moral integrity. Lu Xun explores similar themes but places added emphasis on individualism, intellectual awakening, and the quest for national rejuvenation.

By studying the works of Dickens and Lu Xun, we acquire valuable insights into the complexities of their respective eras, the universality of human experiences, and the enduring relevance of their literary legacies. Their writings continue to inspire readers to critically reflect on societal issues, advocate for justice, and strive for a more compassionate and morally conscious world.

In conclusion, the comparative study of Charles Dickens' and Lu Xun's works offers a rich tapestry of cultural values, societal struggles, and moral dilemmas that transcend time and geography, inviting us to engage with the past and contemplate the present in our collective pursuit of a better future.

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