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Humour in Dickens' Oliver Twist: A Strategy to Reveal the Corruption in Victorian Era

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Abstract--This paper attempts to investigate the use of humour in revealing the idea of corruption in Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*. Corruption was a huge problem in London in the 1830s when Dickens was writing. *Oliver Twist* was one of his best novels that portrayed how corruption lived. Through this novel, he also wanted to show how social and cultural at that time created corrupt behavior in the society. The art of humour created by Dickens is an interesting strategy to deliver the message of corruption. By understanding the art of humour that consists of idiomatic expression, social and cultural context, would help the translator to capture a distinctive creative process that incorporates the linguistic structures and cultural environment of the target language while at the same time remaining as faithful as possible to the original.

Keywords---corruption, distinctive creative process, humour, linguistic structures, novels.

Introduction

Charles Dickens is the great writer of the Victorian age. He was the greatest novelist and was regarded as almost exclusively entertaining (Davis, 1998; Bown, 2014; Hollington, 2014). Charles Dickens works especially his novels influence a lot of people. His genius ways to tell the story make his reader laugh and cry. Dickens humorous language often served as a protest against the abuses of the social and political life of his time (Wall, 1970; Segar, 2020). Dickens does what comedy has always done; it both exposes imperfections in the world and reconciles us to it by making something entertaining out of it. To understand

more on the issues on *Oliver Twist*, a translation to the target language probably cannot be avoided. With the advancement of society, the fields of translation have gradually appeared. Different people have different opinions towards the translation, especially the translation of literary works. It is not an easy job to translate literary works for the translation of literature is to express an artistic conception of the original in another language, which makes readers learn something from the version just like reading the original. The translator should represent what is written or said and the style of the original in another language. That is to say, the translator cannot add anything that the author did not write, or the translator cannot do at his will. In addition, the translator should represent the author's style to make it clear (Meza et al., 2018; Emmanuel et al., 2017; Suryasa et al., 2019). The greatest British author Charles Dickens can better serve as a good example. He was famous for humor, so when a translator does translation about his works, humor must be shown in his version. Dickens's style of writing is perhaps most characterized by its scathing satire in the form of humor. Social commentary and political discourse are good themes for a novel to have, as it addresses a more topical issue, but there is nothing like humor that successfully appeal the attention of the mass audience. This is one characteristic that Dickens undoubtedly mastered as seen by his immense popularity, and *Oliver Twist* is one in a series of his novels where his art of humour has free reign. The art of humor in *Oliver Twist* focuses on two aspects. The caricaturization of the characters and social commentary. *Oliver Twist* is an extreme criticism of Victorian society's treatment of the poor and more importantly of the idea of corruption (Sanders, 2006; Umanilo, 2021; Ryan, 2020).

Literature Review

Translation of the literary works

In the present-day translation has been part of people's life and is needed in many aspects of life. A lot of works has been translated throughout the world and people get the advantages of having information in their own language. Translating literary works is perhaps, always more difficult than translating other types of texts. It has been said that the translation of literary works is one of the highest forms of translation as it involves so much more than simply translating text (Frawley, 1953; Delabastita, 1996). Translating literary works is always challenging and controversial due to aesthetic and expressive values such as the beauty of the words (diction), figurative language, metaphors, the writer's thought, emotion, and differences in cultural and historical contexts. It also deals with the greatest number of peculiar problems and these problems largely depend on who is translating and what he knows. Therefore, the translator should try, at his best, to transfer these specific values into the target language. There are a lot of opinions related with the translation of literature. According to Catford (1978), translation is defined as faithful representation in one language of what is written or said in another language. It points out the importance of faithfulness and integration. As Hermans (2007), says that the translation of literature is to express an artistic conception of the original in another language which can make readers learn something from the version just like reading the original. Literary translation is not an easy job. The translator needs to master two languages well at the same time translator shall also have a culture of literature, language, the

capability of expressing words discernment, and ability of thinking. As a result, when he reads the work of the author he can completely understand the author's meaning and then grasp the motifs of the original. [NIDA & TABER \(1969\)](#), says that if one wants to reproduce the original style satisfactorily, one must keep two points in mind before undertaking the translation. First, the translator must have a macroscopic point of view, namely, a view of the whole, and should always remember that what he is working at is a literary work written by somebody else and try his utmost to turn his translation into a work of art which conforms with the thought, feelings, and style of the original. Thus, the translation will be as moving and vivid as the original work and the reader may be aesthetically entertained as well. Second, he must have a microscopic point of view, namely, the linguistics point of view. In the process of translating, all the paragraphs, sentences, and words should be attentively studied so that the best expressions may be chosen to satisfy the needs of reproducing the thought, feelings, and style of the original. Every word must be weighed carefully, and every figure of the speech dealt with seriously. The quality of translation has nothing to do with the original work or with the original writer; rather, it depends on the theoretical knowledge and practical skill of the translator. It is because translation is not only a science, a science with its own peculiar laws and methods, but also an art—an art of reproduction and re-creation ([Schnurr & Chan, 2011](#); [Civan & Macknight, 2004](#)).

What is humour

Humour, laughter, comedy, different facts of the same feeling, have been defined in very different ways since the dawn of human history. According to [Attardo \(2008\)](#), Humour is a declaration of man's superiority to all that befalls him. A traditional Spanish proverb says, "Humour is a whisper from the soul, imploring mind and body to relax and be at peace again". Humour is a complex cognitive function that often leads to laughter. Humour and laughter are closely related; however, they are not synonymous. Humour is the underlying cognitive process that frequently, but not necessarily leads to laughter. Laughter is a seizure-like activity that can be elicited by experiencing a humorous cognitive stimulus but also other stimuli such as tickling. Thus, one can laugh without a humorous stimulus and similarly one can experience humour without laughter. Humour has been part of the behavioural repertoire of modern Homo Sapiens for thousands of years. One of the earliest historical figures to be firmly associated with humour and laughter was the Greek philosopher Democritus. Known as the laughing philosopher," he not only had a reputation for his mirthful disposition but perhaps also for his tendency to laugh at the stupidity of his fellow citizens" ([Bremmer 1997](#)). There has been extensive dispute over time as to whether it is appropriate to identify comedy and humour as artistic entities. Certainly, nothing in dictionary definitions of art disqualifies comedy and humour from being so identified. It is instructive and provides good material for our contribution to this debate to examine several of these definitions. The Oxford Universal Dictionary (1955) defines art as "The application of skill to subjects of taste, as poetry, music, etc" and perfection of workmanship or execution as an object in itself". Webster's New 20th Century Dictionary (1980) defines art thus creative work generally, or its principles, the making or doing of things that have form and

beauty; art includes painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, drama, etc.

Theories of humour

Basically, there are three fundamental theories of humor i.e. the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory (Ross, 2005). From a linguistic point of view, incongruity theory becomes the most popular theory to analyze humour. Incongruity often used by linguist to analyse the humorous events or situations due to the fact that humour arises from a certain discrepancy in a situation, an unexpected 'glitch' (Samson & Gross, 2012; Ross, 2005). Raskin (2010), states that in incongruity theory, the audience member is led to expect a certain behaviour, statement, chain of events, and then is surprised and humour is produced by the misperception or unrecognized meaning. In superiority theory, we laugh about the misfortunes of others; it reflects our own superiority. Hobbes further explains that humans are in a constant competition with each other, looking for the shortcomings of other persons. He considers laughter as an expression of a sudden realization that we are better than others. On the other hand, relief theory focus on the release tension and "psychic energy". This energy continuously builds up within the human body, has no further use and therefore has to be released. This release is spontaneous and expresses itself in laughter. Tahir (2009), explains that this "psychic energy" in our body is built as an aid for suppressing feelings in taboo areas, like sex or death. A more conventional version of the Relief Theory is that we experience a pleasant sensation when humour replaces negative feelings like pain or sadness.

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor proposes by Raskin (2010) utilizes the idea of scripts to describe the process of producing two or more interpretation from a humorous text. Each joke need two opposing script to display an incongruous opposition, and therefore humorous. Simply, it can be said that the basic notion of the theory is that two interpretations are achieved from a joke, both are scripts. Those interpretations are often as a result of a particular word or phrase, one of which is favored by the reader/hearer. This favored interpretation is placed or set in a part of the text which is affected by the reveal of a joke. The differences in the meaning of those two interpretations of a text/utterance result in incongruity, through its specific opposition.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach i.e descriptive analysis method in which all data are analyzed using a theory that has been explained in the theoretical foundation. This approach then focus on the utterances and context of the utterance in order to figure out the humor in *Oliver Twist*.

Data collection technique

The data collected comes from dialogues from the novel entitled *Oliver Twist*. The first thing the researchers do is read the novel. Second, mark the utterances that have humorous language and the context within it. Finally, analyzing the data that has been obtained.

Data analysis technique

According to [Miles & Huberman \(1994\)](#), there are three important components in conducting data analysis including data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. The steps taken by the author to do the analysis are: 1) Data reduction; eliminating unnecessary scenarios without reducing important information needed, 2) Present data for analysis descriptively, and 3) Conclude existing analyzes

Findings

The forms of Dickens humour in *Oliver Twist* mostly used in verbal humour and caricature. The utterances show a lot of humorous language and even portrayed the words in a form of a caricature description. Therefore, the translation approach cannot be separated from the use of humour in *Oliver Twist* to criticize the act of corruption. The humour used in particular, is satirical by using heavy irony through the characters. Dickens combines realist with fiction as the narrator in *Oliver Twist* is the third person omniscient with more effective tone ([Gonot-Schoupinsky & Garip, 2018](#); [Potrafke, 2012](#)). Through the use of the figures of speech, symbols, images and allegory make the humour become predominantly satirical. The use of humour then helps to points out to the critics of the corruption that becomes the culture of England i.e treatment with children and women, the condition of workhouses, the treatment of government with the poor people of England in that particular era.

Discussion

Oliver Twist is written to attack public policies regarding the poor and corruption among the high and middle classes. [Dennis \(1981\)](#), stated that the primary function of *Oliver Twist* was to reveal the neglect and corruption in that particular era. The way Dickens expresses the corruption in his time is quite interesting. Dickens uses some humour in the form of words, sentences, or phrases to reveal the corruption around society. The famous figure of Mr. Bumble and also the board in the workhouse often described as a fat and very round men to show the symbols of how the corruption appeared in the workhouse.

“Now, Mr. Bumble was a fat man and a choleric...The master was a fat, healthy man...”(*Oliver Twist*, 1961: 6)

“At the top of the table, seated in an arm chair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face...”(*Oliver Twist*, 1961: 9)

“But the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the board were in ectacies...” (*Oliver Twist*, 1961: 11)

The characters are described as a fat and healthy gentleman. It is a humorous act to deliberate the condition of fat and healthy as the substitute of the corruption did by the board. Here, we can see that laughter is primarily used as a weapon to attack corruption among the board. They take the sum for the child and paupers and have the money for themselves. This is a reasonable effect of the board becoming fat and healthy while the child as the paupers got thin. Another

example taken from the famous place at that time; the workhouse. By using humor, Dickens explores the conditions of the poor in the workhouse (Campos et al., 1999; Holmes & Marra, 2002). It is supposed to be a place for the poor and unprivileged, but then, incompetent administration of the system made a workhouse become a place of grotesque practice.

“Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse...”(Oliver Twist, 1961: 1)

“So they establish the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it” (Oliver Twist, 1961: 10).

This shows the humour that Dickens’ used put the famous building into mocking action. The workhouse is a well-known public building, therefore, it is quite famous and everyone knows about it, but they also don’t want to mention it. Besides, deliberate the building that everyone must know Dickens also stated what happened in that building and why people do not want to mention it. Through this setting, the author demonstrates the suffering and sadness that takes place in Victorian society (Lecours & Lhermitte, 1969; Zhang & Ding, 2017).

When Dickens comes down to the details of what is wrong with the system that spawned the workhouses, he brings out the beadle; Mr. Bumble as an object of ridicule that stems from his belief in his own importance. The description of Mr. Bumble is the first caricature presented to the reader. Mr. Bumble is portrayed as a fat, choleric man, with a great idea of his oratorical powers and his own importance.

“Mr. Bumble had a great idea of his oratorical powers and his importance ...”(Oliver Twist, 1961: 6).

As fierce as Mr. Bumble is to the people in the workhouse, it is almost unbelievable that no one in the workhouse sees him as amusing. However, in order to setting him up as an important person, Dickens describes him as a character of a big fall- that comes in the form of Mrs. Corney. In this respect, the humour in *Oliver Twist* is decidedly harsher than that in many other Dickens’s novels. The objects of ridicule are eventually cut down to size, and as much as they might deserve it, it takes much of the amusement out of satire. Another humorous act is the philosophy of the gentleman that inspire them in treating the poor and innocent children.

“Everybody knows the story of another experimental philosopher who had a great theory about a horse being able to live without eating, and who demonstrated it so well, that he had got his own horse down to a straw a day, and would unquestionably have rendered him a very spirited and rampacious animal on nothing at all, if he had not died, four-and-twenty hours before he was to have had his first comfortable bait of air (Holovkin et al., 2021; Topchii et al., 2021). Unfortunately for, the experimental philosophy of the female to whose protecting care *Oliver Twist* was delivered over, a similar result usually attended the operation of _her_ system; for at the very moment when the child had contrived to

exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half-smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world..."(Oliver Twist, 1961).

"...all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays..."(Oliver Twist, 1961: 11).

Life in the workhouse was quite harsh as most of the board of guardians did not provide adequate care for the poor. The workhouse inmates were not given enough food or clothes. They received a small amount of food as Dickens described that unless he had another basin of gruel he might happen to wait the boy who sleep next to him. They also received on arrival were the same clothes they wore every day of their lives, whether working or sleeping. This realistic depiction of workhouse children being fed on bread and gruel reveals the lack of care that was given to workhouse inmates, especially the vulnerable children. Such a representation is also an appeal to society to recognize the government's failure to improve the unpleasant living condition of the workhouse inmates (Anokhin & Schulze, 2009; Čerňanský et al., 2007).

Conclusion

By using the art of humor, Dickens explores the social conditions of that time especially for the poor and unprivileged. He has a critical view of the workhouses, the poor laws and the poor houses. For instance, he talks about the administration's lack and social injustice that make the board and the government take the poor money for their own interest. The corruption system become the culture of the society and made poor people live in harsh and bad conditions. Through the very important scenes in *Oliver Twist* and by using the art of humor the author attacks the corruption system in the Victorian age.

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