An Analysis of the Subaltern Narrative in A Tale of Two Cities

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Abstract: Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities is set against the backdrop of the French Revolution and tells the story of the urban commoners represented by Dr. Manette and Charles Darnay, as well as the plight of the poor embodied by the Defarges. Compared to the corrupt rulers and aristocratic powers, both groups occupy the position of the "subaltern." From the perspective of the "subaltern," and with the aid of theories such as Edward Soja's "Third Space" and Seymour Chatman's "Narrative Voice," we can observe Dickens's depiction of the living conditions and spaces occupied by the commoners. This perspective reveals the narrative structure and viewpoint Dickens employs when writing about their fates, as well as the narrative voice he uses to portray the behaviors of different "subaltern" groups.

Keywords: A Tale of Two Cities, subaltern narrative, space, narrative perspective, narrative voice.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The term "subaltern" was first introduced by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci translated the term "subaltern classes" as "lower classes" or "lower groups" to describe oppressed people and forces marginalized by mainstream power within a nation-state[1]. Subaltern narrative, as a significant form of literary expression, focuses on depicting the life experiences, emotional states, and inner worlds of the lower social classes to authentically reflect social realities. As a realist work set against the backdrop of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* possesses significant literary and social research value.

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the "subaltern" forms the core of the narrative structure. Set against the backdrop of the French Revolution, this element evokes readers' empathy towards the oppressed, making the story more compelling and persuasive. By focusing on the groups living at the bottom of society through a "subaltern" perspective, we can gain a deeper insight into their living conditions, surroundings, psychological states, and more, thus comprehending the sharp and complex class conflicts revealed in the text.

2.   Literature Review

Scholars began analyzing and commenting on Dickens's novels during his lifetime, and this academic pursuit has continued for over a century, resulting in a vast range of studies, methodologies, and findings. Research on the ideological content and artistic features of his works is particularly abundant. Shortly after its publication, Wilkie Collins praised A Tale of Two Cities as "the most perfect work of constructive art"[2]. However, as an experimental piece, some scholars argue that the novel's portrayal of the French Revolution and certain characters does not align with historical facts.

To date, most studies focus on analyzing the artistic characteristics of the novel, such as its narrative structure, character portrayal, and rhetorical techniques, delving into the complexities and multifaceted nature of humanity while exploring themes like compassion, forgiveness, and hatred. In 2003, in *The Dual Variation of Civilian Consciousness and Gentleman Complex: The Duality of Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities*, scholar Gao Jianhong discussed Dickens's tendency to depict the subaltern emotionally while simultaneously presenting upper-class values. Subsequently, Zeng Yi's 2016 publication, *An Analysis of the Ideological Connotation in Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities**, along with several later works, analyzed the portrayal of humanitarianism in the novel from the perspective of the lower classes. In 2020, Zhao Yuanyuan and Zhang Wen, in *Subaltern, Space, and Humor: The Cinematic Reimagining of Dickens's Urbanism*, highlighted the focus on the subaltern perspective and the metaphorical construction in the film adaptations of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Some studies have also begun to emphasize the novel's narrative techniques, such as narrative perspective and voice, offering insights into contemporary novel writing.

3.   The Spatial Architecture of the Subaltern

3.1.   The Spatial Projection of Real-Life Class Structures

American geographer and urban studies scholar Edward Soja posits: "In the 'First Space,' we can examine the absolute and relative locations of things, including the environment of places, as well as the graphical representations of our physical world." The "Second Space," however, pertains to the mental realm—such as the depiction of space in literature, the representation of space in film and art, or individual imaginings of space—all of which can be termed "Second Space." In this realm, various illusory elements strive to conceal reality, turning the real into a substitute for imagination, a projection of an idea[3].

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the representation of the "Second Space" is similarly constructed based on the author's ideological perspective, directly reflecting the social class and real status of the subaltern. In Chapter Five, "The Wine-Shop," Dickens depicts a representative scene of subaltern life: a large wine cask falls in the street, and people nearby "scooped up the wine with broken pottery cups," while others "built small dams with mud," and some even "chewed on the fragments of wood softened by the wine." The spilled wine offers the suffering populace a brief opportunity for self-numbing, a momentary "frenzy" that epitomizes the condition of all subaltern individuals. The lively and passionate surface underscores the deeper realities of their existence.

Additionally, from the perspective of residential sociology, housing disparity is one of the markers of social stratification, objectively dividing society into different ranks. Housing serves not only as a cultural symbol of lower-class dwellings but also as the cramped living space of "subaltern individuals." Its dual identity gives it a more representative significance in spatial architecture. In Chapter Five, Dickens spends considerable effort depicting the place where Dr. Manette is imprisoned: "Through the rusty iron bars of the window, one doesn't need to see; the stench alone reveals the filth and disorder of the surrounding area." The confined, eerie attic becomes Dr. Manette's dwelling place, with the dilapidated old building and gloomy living environment serving as symbols that represent

the living conditions of Dr. Manette and countless others oppressed by the aristocracy. These symbols foreshadow the chasm between social classes and reality. Such typical depictions construct the "Second Space" within the literary work, reflecting the real social class of the characters.

3.2. The Formation of a Space for Subaltern Rebellion

In his work *Thirdspace*, Edward Soja discusses the concept of "Third Space" from a cultural geography perspective, explaining its method of incorporating power relations into spatial analysis. At the same time, he abstracts the concept into a mode of thinking that transcends binary oppositions, describing it as "a space that is simultaneously both central and marginal (while also being neither)"[4]. In realist writing, we observe that the spaces faced by subaltern groups often possess certain limitations, yet within these limitations, there frequently exists a sense of "marginality." This marginality serves both as a barrier and a connection, enabling those at the social bottom to retain their autonomy when confronted with hardships. In short, the subaltern no longer seeks to coexist with the "mainstream" within a unified social hierarchy as victims; instead, they come to accept and recognize their "subaltern" identity.

In the novel, Madame Defarge embodies a dual identity as both an "oppressed individual" and a "revolutionary." She is a typical portrayal of a subaltern character. As a victim of class oppression, Madame Defarge harbors deep resentment against the aristocrats who cruelly murdered her family. This long-standing hatred, nurtured amidst social turmoil, evolves into a force of rebellion, driving her to autonomously distance herself from and oppose mainstream society. Similarly, in the Defarges' wine shop, many rebels choose to abandon their original names and adopt the identity of "Jacques." Under the leadership of the Defarges, they rise up, storm the Bastille, and overthrow the ruling class. As "nameless" individuals, they constantly struggle for survival, resisting the rule of the aristocracy, unwilling to be extinguished in the grand world. By discarding their names, these revolutionaries relinquish their "symbols" within mainstream society, instead seeking self-identity and a new sense of belonging within the "Third Space."

4. Strategies of Subaltern Narrative

The number of named characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* is relatively small compared to its length, and most of these characters are representative of the subaltern class. In each subaltern character, we can observe contradictions in their personalities. To portray their life experiences and psychological activities, Dickens employs various narrative strategies, enriching the characters while advancing the plot.

4.1. Interwoven Narrative Structure

Wang Anyi asserts: "Words are the riddles, structure is the key to decipher them, and the story is the answer"[5]. Structure, as the backbone, supports the text and themes of a novel while also revealing the author's underlying intentions. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens deviates from his usual chronological narrative approach, instead employing flashbacks and interwoven storytelling techniques extensively. Most readers, upon their first reading, may find it difficult to unravel the cause-and-effect relationships within the story. For instance, Mr. Lorry and Miss Lucie rescue Dr. Manette, Darnay is accused of espionage, and the Marquis St. Evrémonde's carriage runs over a poor child—these seemingly unrelated events are, in fact, crucial to the narrative. Within the intricate web of events, each intersecting point serves as a driving force for the plot's progression.

Dr. Manette's wrongful imprisonment results from the corruption of the aristocracy, which is also the reason behind the tragic fate of the Defarges. The intersection of these two characters then leads to the love story between Darnay and Lucie. Although the characters' fates differ throughout the story,

they all exist in the same tumultuous era. Whether it is the revenge-seeking "Jacques" or the others who simply wish for a peaceful life, none can escape the dark tide sweeping through society.

Moreover, to serve the narrative purpose, Dickens separates narrative time from the story's timeline, using summary and omission to highlight key events. In many chapters, he sets up indicators for the shifts in time and space, such as in the first chapter of the second book, "The Golden Thread," titled "Five Years Later," or the beginning of the sixth chapter, where he states, "the tide of time had flowed on for nearly four months." This narrative strategy achieves a seamless and natural transition between different temporal and spatial scenes, emphasizing the shift in characters' states and maintaining a cohesive and tight connection between chapters.

4.2. Multiple Narrative Perspectives

As a realist novel reflecting social conflicts, Dickens consciously incorporates the perspective of the subaltern, contemplating their fate deeply. The entire novel alternates between a first-person retrospective perspective and an omniscient perspective. From the beginning, the story adopts a retrospective form, focusing on Dr. Manette as the central thread of the narrative, followed by several experiential descriptions that echo each other. For instance, through Dr. Manette's recounting, readers learn about the Evrémonde brothers. Compared to the omniscient perspective, which offers insights into characters' motivations, this perspective enhances the sense of immersion and authenticity.

The omniscient observer is inherently all-knowing, but the author does not directly reveal or analyze each character's psychological state. Instead, Dickens uses foreshadowing and intentionally leaves gaps, creating a psychological distance between the reader and the characters while hinting at their fates and experiences. In several instances, the author depicts Dr. Manette's unusual reactions to Darnay: when Dr. Manette and his daughter defend Darnay against charges of treason, Dr. Manette "looked at Darnay with a peculiar gaze, staring at him intensely, his brows furrowed, showing a mixture of distrust, aversion, and even a hint of fear." Due to his long imprisonment, Dr. Manette's memory has weakened, but a familiar face still triggers painful recollections. This deliberate hint raises questions for the reader, prompting them to explore the connection between the two characters. When Darnay expresses his affection for Lucie to Dr. Manette, his reaction is equally abnormal: "He suddenly fell silent, his expression odd, and the blank look in his eyes during the silence was also strange." In this scene, the "sound of hammering" symbolizes the awakening of painful memories buried deep within Dr. Manette's mind. This callback surpasses ordinary psychological descriptions, revealing the internal struggle within Dr. Manette. Although the author does not explicitly state it, readers may infer that Dr. Manette has realized his wrongful imprisonment was linked to Darnay's family. Such narrative strategies not only set up the plot but also shroud the entire work in a layer of suspense.

5. The Subaltern Narrative Voice

As James Phelan has pointed out, "narrative voice" is one of the frequently used yet inadequately defined critical terms. In this context, "narrative voice" leans towards the "voice" of the author himself. According to the degree of involvement, American narratologist Seymour Chatman categorizes narrators into three types: the absent narrator, the covert narrator, and the overt narrator. The voice of an absent narrator is difficult to discern, while an overt narrator takes advantage of his position to clearly express his stance and opinions. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the author's presence falls between the first two categories. When depicting the actions of subaltern characters at various stages, Dickens conceals his personal attitude within the arrangement of plot and language, subtly intervening and influencing the narrative to participate in constructing the work's expressive structure.

5.1. Support for Resistance Against Oppression

Throughout the novel, the author's intention is clear—to depict the miserable lives of the French people under feudal tyranny, expose the corrupt rule of the aristocracy, and express deep sympathy for the suffering of the people. In the narration of two key events in the early part of the novel, Dickens establishes the emotional tone for the entire work. The first event is the "resurrection" of the protagonist, Dr. Manette, and his reunion with his daughter, Lucie; the second is Darnay's estrangement from his family, leading him to London, where he falls in love with Lucie. These events indicate that the author's intent is to reveal the enslavement and oppression of the common people by the ruling class.

The outbreak of the French Revolution was not a sudden event; it was the result of long-term brewing and the accumulation of public resentment. Therefore, a significant portion of the narrative focuses on the subaltern characters, giving them a voice to cry out for justice: when a wine cask accidentally breaks, spilling wine onto the street, people rush out to seize the wine. Among them, a drunken man uses his finger to write the vivid word "blood" on the wall. This symbolic depiction foreshadows the impending bloodshed. The women's knitting becomes a record of the crimes committed by the nobility, with the "Three Fates" metaphorically representing the surge of the revolutionary tide. As the storm approaches, Dickens emphasizes the anger brewing within the hearts of the French commoners, signaling that the fire of revolution is about to ignite.

Additionally, by analyzing the author's attitude towards the aristocracy, who stand in opposition to the "subaltern" people, we can see that Dickens recognizes the legitimacy of the revolution. In Chapter Seven, "Monseigneur in Town," the author employs heavy satire to describe the corrupt and extravagant lives of the nobility: "If only three people attended him while he drank his chocolate, such an improper scene would bring disgrace upon his coat of arms." This sharp contrast highlights the inevitability and significance of the revolution. When the Marquis's carriage runs over a child on the roadside, Dickens uses the phrase "a bundle of something" to describe the boy's body. This understatement reflects how the Marquis perceives the common people's lives as worthless, delivering a powerful shock to the reader. The commoners, forced to fear the nobility, are inevitably driven to revolt.

5.2. Skepticism Toward Revolutionary Violence

By depicting scenes of the Parisian people storming the Bastille and punishing their oppressors during the French Revolution, the novel presents a controversial image of the revolutionaries, thereby exploring the relationship between revolution and humanity. In Dickens's portrayal, the revolutionaries are not abstract entities; in contrast to the virtuous and kind figures of Dr. Manette and his daughter, the author expresses disapproval of the violent acts committed by the revolutionaries during the revolution.

During this turbulent period, the people of the Saint Antoine district are depicted as the typical victims of exploitation. The brutal murder of Madame Defarge's family by the Evrémonde brothers left her with an indelible hatred for the aristocracy. In the early stages of the uprising, she decapitates enemies without hesitation and even attempts to frame Lucie and Dr. Manette to achieve her personal revenge. Like Madame Defarge, many revolutionaries are blinded by their rage at this moment. To break free from long-standing oppression, they engage in revolutionary struggles, transforming from fervent idealists to perpetrators of unrestrained violence, thus distorting the original intentions of the revolution. "The rivers of the south were choked with corpses thrown in during the night; prisoners were shot in rows under the southern winter sun." To some extent, revolutionaries gained the "freedom" to judge but were simultaneously stripped of their own freedom.

The prominence of the theme of violence in the latter part of *A Tale of Two Cities* is not merely an account of the perpetrators in a sea of blood; it is also a fusion of the dual themes of revenge and humanitarianism—two themes that conflict yet converge, making the motivations and trajectories of the subaltern characters more vivid. Regardless of the narrative voice the author adopts, it is not a simple matter of praising the early "justice" or condemning the later "atrocities." Madame Defarge's "violence" stems from oppression and personal tragedy, while the revolutionaries' behaviors are influenced by social realities beyond their individual will. Thus, Dickens's narrative voice on "justice" and "violence" ultimately converges on a call for humanitarianism, giving the novel greater relevance amid the intense and brutal revolution.

6.   Conclusion

This paper explores the use of spatial symbols in *A Tale of Two Cities*, particularly those closely related to subaltern narratives, to analyze how the novel employs spatial structures and operations to reveal social injustice, the complexities of human nature, and the struggles and hopes of the lower classes. In the novel, Dickens's subaltern narrative extends beyond the elevation of themes and character portrayal. By integrating the "subaltern" perspective into various subaltern characters, he constructs a polyphonic narrative. The dialogue, conflict, and integration between these different voices not only enhance the authenticity and emotional resonance of the work but also demonstrate the diversity and inclusiveness of subaltern narratives.

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