

Power and Emotion: Food Writing in *Dombey and Son*

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Abstract

Charles John Huffam Dickens has a certain amount of food writing in his novel *Dombey and Son*, which carries profound implications and meanings. Analyzing the food writing content in this work deeply is conducive to a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings that the food writing conceals, clarifying the power relations and the flow of emotions contained in the food writing, and thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the duality in Charles John Huffam Dickens's thoughts expressed through food writing in this novel, which are about his critique of social issues at that time, as well as his expectations for addressing the social issues and for the development of the society at that time.

Keywords

Food writing; *Dombey and Son*; power relations; the flow of emotions; duality.

1. Introduction

Descriptions related to food are one of the important elements of writing in many literary works. With the continuous development and advancement of society and history, as well as the deepening of people's understanding of these, the food writing in many literary works is no longer just a superficial description, but has become a mirror to reflect historical development, the characteristics of the era, the personalities of characters, and the thoughts of the author and so on to a certain extent, carrying diverse and profound meanings.

During the Victorian era, Britain completed the processes of industrialization, modernization and urbanization, achieving multiple transformations in economy, politics, culture and society. [1] British society experienced prosperous development at that time, but at the same time, many negative issues emerged during the process of social development, such as the alienation of human nature, the negative influence of the idea of money supremacy and the like. Charles John Huffam Dickens's (hereinafter referred to as Dickens) work *Dombey and Son* is a product of this historical period. This novel vividly portrays and reflects some of the characteristics and social issues of this era. In this novel, Dickens has numerous descriptions related to food. Beyond the superficial presentation, these descriptions contain profound power relations, reveal the flow of emotions, and imply some significant characteristics of the Victorian era. These descriptions are one of the textual carriers for Dickens's criticism of real issues and expression of his ideas. Meanwhile, they are also a crucial entry point for readers to understand the social development conditions at that time and gain insight into Dickens's inner thoughts to a certain degree.

The food writing that this paper studied is not limited to the descriptions of food itself, but also includes the writing of various dietary practices, such as dietary scenes, dietary atmospheres and dietary rules and so on, thereby exploring the deeper implications of power and emotions contained in the food writing. Therefore, having an in-depth analysis of the food writing in this work contributes to developing a more thorough comprehension of the intrinsic connection between food and power, grasping the power relations within food writing, experiencing the flow of emotions reflected in the food writing, probing the complex duality of thoughts that Dickens reveals through the food writing in this novel. In addition, this approach also helps to

enrich the interpretation perspectives of the novel *Dombey and Son*, allowing for a more multi-layered appreciation of this work's content, broadening and deepening readers' understanding and perception of it.

2. The Manifestation of Power and Resistance in Food Writing

The food writing in the novel *Dombey and Son* serves as a medium and tool for presenting power relations, embodying both the manifestation of various forms of power and the implications of resistance. They weave a part of the social landscape of Victorian society together. The following analysis will focus specifically on the manifestation of power and resistance to power as reflected in the food writing.

2.1. The Manifestation of Power in Food Writing

The theory of power holds a significant position in Michel Foucault's (hereinafter referred to as Foucault) thought. [2] In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault points out that the body is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." [3] Thus it can be seen that the body is both the object of power's action and a crucial arena of power, and power will act on it through various means.

In the novel *Dombey and Son*, the food writing, the body and power are intertwined, having a complex and profound relationship. Power intervenes in the body through various means, such as dietary rules, dining etiquette, and dietary control and so on, imposing discipline on the body and thereby revealing the operational mechanism of power relations. Within the relationship between these three elements, food occupies a central position. It serves as a crucial practical medium linking the body and power, enabling two distinct forms of power, that is to say, class power and patriarchal power, to be concretely manifested through dietary practices.

2.1.1. The Manifestation of Class Power

The first Mrs. Dombey passes away shortly after giving birth to her son, Paul. Then, feeding Paul and his daily life becomes a problem. In order to solve this problem, Mr. Dombey hires a nurse to care for Paul. In this hiring process, Mrs. Chick, a member of Mr. Dombey's family and her friend, Miss Tox represent the position of the bourgeoisie that Mr. Dombey stands for. They explain the treatment to Richards, and this explanation centers on food and drink. However, beneath the surface, this explanation conceals the hypocrisy of the class represented by Mr. Dombey and the true nature of the power discipline which is imposed on Richards as a nurse. Mrs. Chick tells Richards that working as a nurse in Mr. Dombey's household can provide her with generous living conditions. She can enjoy the very best of everything. Moreover, she can order the meal every day, and no matter what she wants to eat, someone will be ready to prepare it for her. At the same time, Miss Tox chimes in, stating that Richards can drink porter without any restrictions. [4] All these descriptions seem so happy, but the abundant food supply is only used to deceive Richards. The true purpose behind this is to make her willingly work in Mr. Dombey's household, thereby achieving Mr. Dombey's own goals and interests.

The happy picture constructed through food is ultimately torn apart by food itself, revealing the truest and most realistic side of things. Behind the unlimited food supply and freedom of choice lies a sudden shift toward dietary restrictions and rules, and these are the real treatments in food for Richards and these are the real requirements that she needs to follow. After mentioning some good treatments, Mrs. Chick immediately points out that there are also some dietary restrictions here, that is to say, eating fewer vegetables, while Miss Tox quickly adds that Richards also needs to eat fewer pickles. [4] At this moment, the false veil of the abundant food treatment promised earlier is lifted, and the hypocrisy of the social class represented by Mr. Dombey gradually comes to light. Although the generous treatment initially described seems to

give Richards some autonomy and decision-making power in food, it's actually false. The restrictions mentioned later are actually the real situation that Richards has to face, and her so-called autonomy in food faces a very real problem, namely that she can't erase the fact that this autonomy no longer has true freedom, because this has undergone the power control of the class represented by Mr. Dombey and has lost its intrinsic meaning.

Mr. Dombey hires Richards for specific purposes. Beyond achieving his objectives, he doesn't genuinely consider her needs. Instead, he restricts her dietary choices and freedom by controlling and managing her diet, incorporating Richards into his own management and exercising control over her. In fact, the dietary restrictions imposed on Richards are actually a way for Mr. Dombey, who is a representative of the bourgeoisie, to physically discipline a lower-class laborer through the employment relationship. This physical discipline is realized through dietary practices, and at the same time, the class power is concretely manifested.

2.1.2. The Manifestation of Patriarchal Power

The Victorian era is a typical patriarchal society. [5] Women in this era are in a very difficult situation, facing the discipline imposed by patriarchal power. Certain depictions related to food in *Dombey and Son* reveal this patriarchal power.

Seating arrangements and other dining etiquette play an important role as part of the food writing. Mr. Dombey, as the executor of the patriarchal power in his family, hopes that his wife can understand her responsibilities and tasks during meals and banquets, maintaining and highlighting his social status and safeguarding the dignity of the family. These give rise to both implicit and explicit influences and demands, which actually reflects Mr. Dombey's use of patriarchal power to discipline women through dietary practices. The first Mrs. Dombey is well aware of Mr. Dombey's social status and family position, living under the invisible discipline of patriarchy. She always sits at the head of his dining table and presides over the various household ceremonies in a very dignified and ladylike manner. [4] As Mrs. Dombey, she has her own position at the table and her own tasks to complete, and these tasks are actually influenced by Mr. Dombey, serving him. He uses his own power to influence his wife's table manners and the like, implicitly requiring what she is expected to undertake and fulfill in her role as Mrs. Dombey.

In addition, Mr. Dombey makes specific demands for his second wife, Edith, regarding her conduct at meals and banquets. Mr. Dombey has personally experienced Edith's attitude and behavior during the meal and the banquet, which doesn't follow the way he has anticipated. After this, Mr. Dombey makes it clear to Edith that he hopes she can take on more of the workload during this occasion, and she needs to know her responsibilities as Mrs. Dombey. Besides, she should show greater respect when entertaining his friends, and she needs to understand that his friends' visits are a great honor for her. [4] These demands from Mr. Dombey are directives imposed on Edith, and these also demonstrate his attempt to make Edith a so-called qualified Mrs. Dombey, as well as his own patriarchal power.

In the social background at that time, Mr. Dombey's actions are an application of the patriarchal power he possesses. Through table manners, banquet etiquette and so on, he imposes tangible and intangible physical discipline on his two wives, and these dietary practices also enable the patriarchal power implemented by Mr. Dombey to be concretely manifested in his daily life.

2.2. Resistance to Power in Food Writing

In his work *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault points out that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." [6] This demonstrates the close relationship and complex connection between power and resistance, and resistance usually accompanies power. The food writing in the novel *Dombey and Son* not only carries the connotation of power discipline, but also presents the resistance acts of the characters in the power relations. This

resistance is primarily manifested as a challenge to patriarchal power, with a particular focus on the character Edith.

The marriage between Mr. Dombey and Edith is transactional in nature. To a certain extent, Edith is objectified in this marriage, and this is closely tied to various factors, including the patriarchal social context at that time and the dominant position men held in family and marital relationships. However, Edith doesn't passively accept this power relationship. Instead, she resists it in her own way.

At the dinner marking Edith's first meal at Mr. Dombey's dining table, the bride Edith rebels against this marriage that is transactional and commercial, and against Mr. Dombey's patriarchal authority in marriage and family in her own way. This rebellion reflects her rejection of the potential disciplinary mechanisms in marital and family relationships, and the food becomes an important way of her resistance. In the dining area of Mr. Dombey's house, the silver and gold tableware displayed on the sideboard is ostentatious, but Edith refuses to lower herself to take a look when passing by, as if they are a pile of garbage. [4] During this meal, Edith's posture is just "like a statue", [4] fully displaying her coldness and unwillingness.

Before his own company goes bankrupt, Mr. Dombey has a very substantial source of wealth, and the abundant financial resources play a role in maintaining and supporting his social status and family position. The gold and silver tableware in Mr. Dombey's home is not merely tableware, and this also represents Mr. Dombey's financial power, as well as the social authority and family authority he has strengthened through his financial resources, which is one of the external manifestations of his patriarchal power. However, in Edith's eyes, these gold and silver tableware are worthless, and she shows a disdainful attitude. Actually, this is her rebellion against the patriarchal authority and power that Mr. Dombey exercised within the family and marriage, which is carried by the silverware. Furthermore, Edith's indifferent attitude in this meal is actually a rebellion against this marriage and a rejection of the traditional gender role norms imposed on women by the society at that time. All of these are closely related to the patriarchal social background and patriarchal power of that era.

Although Edith is under the demands and restrictions that the patriarchal society imposes on women, and she is influenced by Mr. Dombey's patriarchal authority and discipline in their marriage and family, she doesn't totally lose her sense of self-identity and resistance. Instead, she uses her own methods to resist. During this process, food becomes a significant carrier for her to show her resistance. Both her attitude towards tableware and her attitude towards this meal make her spirit of resistance more tangible, revealing her acts of resistance.

3. The Flow of Emotions in Food Writing

Sidney Wilfred Mintz (hereinafter referred to as Mintz) is known as the "father of the anthropology of food", and whether within the field of anthropology or outside of it, his research on food is perhaps the most renowned. [7] In his book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Mintz mentions that although the importance and forms of food and eating as means of establishing and maintaining social relations have changed, we can't deny that they still play a crucial role and hold significant meanings in the expression of emotions. [8] From this, it can be seen that although the forms and functions of food have been constantly changing with the development of society, it's still an important carrier of emotional communication and emotional expression, and has profound emotional connotations and value. Different dietary scenes and dietary atmospheres can convey different emotional characteristics and connotations, and also have distinct functions and meanings. In the writing of food in the novel *Dombey and Son*, these emotional connotations are diverse and fluid. The following words will focus on Mr. Dombey, using the emotional changes he shows in meals

related to family as the main line, and then the following words will have an analysis of the two aspects of emotional indifference and emotional reconstruction.

3.1. Emotional Indifference

Many of the food narratives centered on Mr. Dombey are associated with emotional indifference. This characteristic of emotion is more obvious when contrasted with the warmth and coziness conveyed in the food accounts of the Toodle family.

After Mr. Toodle has eaten and drunk his fill, he doesn't neglect his children. The scene of them having irregular morsels vividly demonstrates the essence of family love. During the time of their irregular morsels, he occasionally distributes the food to his children, and they take a bite of the bread-and-butter in his hand. Moreover, he also gives the children tea to drink. Although these are simple foods, the children regard them as a rare delicacy, and they express their joy through dancing and the like. [4] Through this dining scene and atmosphere, it is evident that Mr. Toodle always has his children in his heart, and the relationship between them is very harmonious. The atmosphere during their irregular morsels time reflects their emotional connection and emotional communication. The children are filled with affection for each other, and the warmth of the family is revealed from it, allowing readers to feel the warmth of the family.

In Victorian novels, descriptions of dinner parties are usually included. [9] In the novel *Dombey and Son*, apart from dinner parties, other forms of parties also appear, which are an important part of many people's daily lives. The relevant dietary scenes and atmospheres of Mr. Dombey in the family's early period form a sharp contrast with the dietary scene and the atmosphere of the Toodle family. At this moment, food becomes a witness to the indifferent emotions. At Paul's christening feast, although the food is plentiful and exquisite, almost all the food is closely related to the adjective "cold", such as a cold fillet of veal, some cold preparation of calf's head, cold fowls, cold wine and so on. After eating these, the guests couldn't help but feel a chill, but Mr. Dombey shows no reaction at all. [4] The repeated use of the word "cold" has already set the tone for this feast. Just like the cold dishes they eat at the table, the feast is permeated with a chilling atmosphere. [4] The cold atmosphere at Paul's christening feast seems to be a sense of sadness and a certain degree of mourning for the death of the first Mrs. Dombey, but in reality, it contains deeper meanings. After the death of the first Mrs. Dombey, Mr. Dombey feels regretful, but his regret is like the feeling that something is missing in his household furnishings, calm and appropriate. [4] Therefore, the cold atmosphere at the christening feast serves more as a symbol of Mr. Dombey's emotional indifference, and this feast is just a ceremonial formality. Compared with the atmosphere of Toodle family when they have irregular morsels, Paul's christening feast is more like a gathering of strangers coming together to eat and complete a ritual, without any warmth between family members. For Mr. Dombey, the death of his first wife is certainly a loss, but its emotional impact on him is very limited, far less than the influence of wealth, status and power on him. Meanwhile, for Mr. Dombey, the inheritance significance of Paul as his son is far greater than his significance as a family member. As his heir, Paul will inherit all of his wealth, and what he should do is to raise Paul to be an excellent heir and keep these wealth. Mr. Dombey has been blinded by wealth, status, and power, and his pursuit of wealth, status and power is placed above his emotional relationships. The cold food at the feast is a reflection of his inner indifferent emotions.

In Mr. Dombey's eyes, everyone can be valued, and his attitudes also reflect the value of a person to him. In the process of pursuing wealth, status and power, he gradually becomes alienated, neglecting the emotional connections between people and between family and becoming a person with indifferent emotions. In fact, Mr. Dombey is a representative of people like him in the Victorian era. The indifferent emotions he shows are actually a manifestation of the social drawbacks caused by the prevalence of materialism in the rapid development of Victorian

society. Such people place the pursuit of money, status and power in a more important position, and neglect the emotional connections between people. To a certain extent, this social climate causes the estrangement of people's emotional relationships, the alienation of family relationships and the distortion of human nature and the like, which are the social issues that Dickens reveals and critiques through the character, Mr. Dombey.

3.2. Emotional Reconstruction

The emotional connotations in the food writing not only reveal Mr. Dombey's indifferent emotions, but also record the emotional reconstruction and renewed warmth in family he achieves after his self-reflection. At this point, Mr. Dombey gradually awakens and gains self-redemption in the realm of emotions between people and in family relationships.

The indifferent attitude is almost the label of Mr. Dombey in his early years. However, the death of Paul shatters his rosy vision that wealth and status can exist perpetually in the Dombey's family to some degree. The betrayal of his wife challenges his authority and makes it loosen. The bankruptcy of the company fundamentally impacts the wealth, social status, and the dominance power over certain people that Mr. Dombey has long used to establish his identity. These events are part of the major events in Mr. Dombey's life. All the events he has experienced before in his life all emerge after the bankruptcy of the company, and after the bankruptcy of the company, his previous world collapses. Although Florence has always been ignored by her father, her love for him never changes. [10] After Mr. Dombey's bankruptcy, it's Florence who stops him when he shows the tendency of self-destruction and she continues to slowly and gently warm him with her love. All these events gradually change Mr. Dombey and lead to a transformation and reconstruction of his emotions. After Mr. Dombey's bankruptcy, Florence comes to his side, takes good care of him, and stays with him in his room. As time passes, Mr. Dombey gradually finds himself and the family emotions that are ignored by him. In the subsequent daily life, once Mr. Dombey drinks with the captain, Gills and other people. During this process, he blesses his daughter Florence and his son-in-law Walter, and when the captain wants to toast, he raises his hand early and waits there. Then the two clink glasses, and others do the same. The clinking of glasses makes a cheerful and happy tinkling sound. [4] The overall atmosphere of this dining scene is more comforting, warmer, and more heartfelt compared to the atmosphere of the christening feast and the like that Mr. Dombey has attended before, showing the flow and change of his emotions.

Mr. Dombey can get along peacefully with the captain, Gills and other people without prejudice during drinking is a major breakthrough for him, as well as a strong evidence of his emotional recovery. During drinking, expressing his blessings to Florence and Walter demonstrates the transformation and reconstruction of his own emotions. At this moment, he no longer judges his daughter based on value, and he is no longer blinded by money, power and status. Besides, he doesn't abandon and lose the beautiful side of humanity at this moment, but chooses to feel the warmth within the family with his heart, to immerse himself in it, and to return to his true self.

4. The Duality in Food Writing

Food writing is an important element in some of Dickens's works. Behind the food writing, there exists his criticism of social climate, his longing for an ideal society and the like. [11] The food writing in *Dombey and Son* embodies this duality. On the one hand, it reflects Dickens's criticism of the social issues of that time, while on the other hand, it expresses his expectations for the development of society at that time.

In terms of social criticism, Dickens points out the problems existing in the social development process by the power and emotional connotations contained in the food writing, such as the the

inequality of classes, the drawbacks of the patriarchal society, the predicaments of women in marriage and family, the lack of emotions, the drawbacks of the ideology of money supremacy, and the alienation of human nature and so on. Various aspects of food, including different dietary scenes, dietary products and dietary atmospheres present these problems in concrete and realistic forms, allowing readers to more tangibly feel the problems existing in the social development process at that time. When social criticism is integrated into daily life, readers' perception and understanding will be enhanced, and the social critical thoughts expressed by Dickens will thus be more thought-provoking and leave a deeper impression.

Apart from social criticism, Dickens also conveys his positive thoughts and inner expectations for the development of society at that time through food writing. The resistance against power is a response to the power's discipline and suppression, and the transformation and reconstruction of emotions are the redemption and disintegration of the indifferent emotions. Edith shows her defiance in her own way through various aspects of food, and Mr. Dombey eventually regains his self and finds the family warmth that he ignores. These imply Dickens's expectations for the development of society at that time. Through the food writing in this novel, we can see Dickens's expectations for addressing the social issues at that time. These expectations correspond to his social criticism and reflect his profound concern for various aspects, including his reflection on the issues existing in social development, his pursuit of social progress and the return of human warmth.

Dickens's criticism of social issues is intertwined with his expectations for the development of society at that time, and both of them are integrated into his food writing, creating the duality within his food writing. This duality is also presented in a more concrete and multifaceted way through specific food practices.

5. Conclusion

The novel *Dombey and Son* contains a considerable number of food writing, which has significant connotations and meanings and is a vivid portrayal of a facet of Victorian society. The perspective of the food writing reveals a different aspect of this novel. The complex power relations and emotional connotations embedded within the descriptions related to food can also be felt from this perspective. Furthermore, by deeply grasping these two dimensions, that is to say, power and emotion, the duality in the food writing of this work can be perceived, which is conducive to better understanding Dickens's criticism of the social issues at that time, as well as his expectations for addressing these social issues and the development of society at that time.

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