

Writing of Personal Hygiene in *Great Expectations* and Its Moral Metaphor

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Abstract

In the Victorian period, sanitary reform and religion combined to endow personal hygiene with ethical and moral significance, forming a dichotomy marked by dirt that dirt became a criterion for judging cleanliness and filth, virtue and depravity. In *Great Expectations* personal hygiene is the measure by which Pip measures the ethics and morality of others, the external representation of Miss Havisham's moral degradation, and the tool by which Mrs. Joe and Mr. Jaggers whitewash themselves. The writing of personal hygiene in the novel presents the Victorian ethical imagination and ethical structure, reveals the hypocrisy of the society and the ethical predicament in that period, implies the arbitrariness and unreliability of personal hygiene discourse, and shows Dickens' reflection on sanitary reform and the demand for new ethical criteria.

Keywords

Great Expectations; personal hygiene; moral metaphor; sanitary reform.

1. Introduction

On the way to his hometown, Pip had met two prisoners and given a detailed description of appearance "their coarse mangy ungainly outer surface, as if they were lower animals" (*Great Expectations*, 1860-1861) and he "felt the convict's breathing, not only on the back of my head, but all along my spine" (246). From this, it is clear that dirt and smell are one of the main concerns of the author, which could deprive men of their humanity and morality, thereby degrading them into lower animals. In this sense, the issue of personal hygiene is not only, physically, about the appearance of cleanliness, but also become a discourse or metaphor. To understand the construction of the metaphor of personal hygiene, we need to go back to Victorian era when Charles Dickens lived to explore what combined forces formed the discourse of personal hygiene and how he used it to shape his characters.

Dickens has long paid attention to issues of personal hygiene and public health, and especially the urban health environment has been his focus. Karl Smith Ashley holds the view that personal hygiene in *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Bleak House* shares the same structure that neither body nor spirit can get rid of the penetration of dirt and then get degraded (63-73). The urban filth in *Bleak House* indicates the trigger for the spread of epidemics, and it intertwines with people's physical health and moral problems, and exposes the "internal contradictions and institutional problems of the city" to the public directly (Luo 123). However, the study of hygiene in Dickens' novels mostly focuses on the macro level of urban health environment, while the micro level of personal hygiene involving body, clothing and house-keeping is rarely mentioned. Franziska Quabeck's *Dickens' Dirty Children* is one of the few studies to look at personal hygiene in Dickens' novels. In this essay, by illustrating the connection between the child and dirt in *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*, Quabeck (131) demonstrates the metaphorical meaning of dirt, that is, the characterization of identity and character, and criticizes the arbitrariness of this metaphorical meaning. In fact, there are many descriptions of personal hygiene in *Great Expectations*,

whether it is Mrs. Joe in an apron engaged with washing in the house, Pip's getting well washed and dressed before entering the manor, or the smell of soap on Mr. Jaggers' hands, all of which highlight the importance of personal hygiene in the novel. This paper takes the relevant plots of personal hygiene as the entry point to analyze how personal hygiene is related to moral issues, how this connection affects the process of exclusion and inclusion of social power, and what Dickens thinks about this order of power. By a culture study approach, this paper try to indicate that the depict of personal hygiene in *Great Expectations* presents the Victorian ethical imagination and ethical structure, reveals the hypocrisy of the society and the ethical dilemma caused by it, and implies the arbitrariness and unreliability of personal hygiene discourse.

2. The Connection Between Personal Hygiene and Morality

In the Victorian period, personal hygiene has long gone beyond the category of animal nature and entered the social field. Sanitary reform, religion and other factors as a joint force gave personal hygiene morality and class character, and constructed the discourse related to personal hygiene.

The very point of sanitary reform is that reformers did not primarily battle against dirt out of aesthetic revulsion, but rather because dirt was incontrovertibly linked to disease and death. From 1801 to 1841, London's population increased by one million, 42 towns had populations of more than 25,000, and by 1861 there were six cities in England with populations of more than 250,000 (Porter 112). However, urban planning was far from keeping up with population growth, and sanitation facilities designed for low population densities were under enormous pressure, from water supply to sewage, to near-collapse. What this led to was that "an unprecedented volume of waste matter overflowed from cesspools, rotted in out-of-the-way streets, and flooded the River Thames, (Allen 1)", which brought about the "stench" becoming a prominent feature of 19th century English towns (Porter 113). The Victorian people, who were suffering from cholera, typhus and tuberculosis in smoggy, stinky England, found that there seemed to be a link between sanitation and the spread of disease. During the cholera epidemics of 1831 and 1832, for example, "it soon became apparent ... that the disease sought out the poorest districts, the places where sanitation was most neglected, the areas most befouled by excremental filth and other accumulated dirt. (Rosen 184)" In these circumstances, the hope that industrialization and urbanization would increase happiness was shattered by dirt and disease, and the recognition of cultural and social order was eroded, and a sanitary reform was urgently needed.

In fact, in nineteenth-century England, when sanitary reform entered the public eyes, moral reform was also in full swing, and the two were not running in independent tracks, but were complementary and intertwined. sanitary reformers seek inspiration from a range of reform reports and social statistics to make people believe "the sanitary reform movement ... emerged to tackle the issues of 'moral and physical' degradation", among which is "most powerfully publicised by Edwin Chadwick in his *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842). (Robert 158)" This report conclusively established the incontrovertible link between environment and disease, and is usually taken by historians as the marker which signals the start of an age of public health reform, albeit halting, piecemeal and very uneven in its effects in different localities. The immorality caused by grime refers especially to slums and their inhabitants: "chaotic and sinful slums degrade the people who live there physically, mentally and morally. (qtd. in Steinbach 13)" Besides, in that period, "cleanliness was claimed as an absolute good in its own right, and was used (often, it seems, unconsciously) as a sort of symbolic shorthand for a whole host of other 'goods', from respectability and ordered domesticity, to thrift, financial probity, honesty and sexual purity. Conversely, cleanliness's opposite, dirt, was seen as an evil in itself and was used to represent all sorts of other evils. (Kelly, 37)" Therefore, where dirt has been driven out, purity and enlightenment have found a congenial home; and it has always been found that to become clean is to take the first step in becoming good, wise, and great. Apparently, Dickens himself agreed with this statement.

Whether it is the “Jacob’s Island appears as the dirtiest part of the metropolis whose revolting truths lie hidden from the general view” (Schulting 49) in the slums of *Oliver Twist*, or the suggestion in *Bleak House* that “it is almost impossible to ask people to be religious and moral when basic cleanliness and health cannot be guaranteed” (Luo 127), it shows that “criminals, the paupers, and the houses ... are alike in their filthiness, their wretchedness, and their deformity.” (Schulting 49) It is understandable, then, that health reformers hope to reduce the spread of epidemics through improved urban and personal hygiene, but as Reverend Charles Girdlestone wrote in 1853, “Health ... is not the only gain which sanitary reformers aim at”, but “moral[ization] of the population” and “a harmonious social order” (Allen 2) were their ultimate aspirations.

Sanitary reform guided people to fulfill their moral responsibility through the improvement of personal hygiene from the practical level, but religion, as an ideology, also entrusts personal hygiene with morality. By shaping cultural consciousness, religion has formed the understanding of the dichotomy between body and dirt, that people have been removing inorganic and disordered dirt on the organic and ordered body by various means. Religion emphasizes the unity of body and spirit, and the purity of spirit needs to be premised on the cleanliness of body. In the church and chapel, preachers repeated the old saw, popularised by Wesley, that “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” (Jackson 138). This was not only spiritual metaphor - the echo of spiritual purity in physical cleanliness - but practical moral instruction. In Genesis, God created the image of human beings in his own image. Attaching importance to personal hygiene is the restoration of his own image and the return to God’s sacred image, while neglecting personal hygiene is blasphemy against God and “diminish[s] one’s faith in the eyes of others” (Jackson 138). Coincidentally, this proverb also appears in *Great Expectations*. In the novel, Mrs. Joe becomes almost the face of cleanliness. She “almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops” (7) and “is a very clean housekeeper” (22). Pip disapproves of this, claiming that she “had an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself” (22, but Dickens intervenes intentionally later in the story, arguing that Mrs. Joe attention to hygiene is justified: “cleanliness is next to Godliness, and some people do the same by their religion.” (22) To sum up, from what has been mentioned above, it can be concluded that “religious purity has played a unique role in the history of personal hygiene.” (Smith 24)

As Sullivan puts it, “the challenge of shaping dirt and negotiating with its mobile grit functions as a metaphor for the project of modernity.” (526) Sanitary reform can not only incorporate the body into the management system to reduce the spread of infectious diseases and make it a “life politics”, but also improve the status of the people morally, thus improving the civilization of the whole society. Both these aspects are in line with the expectations of modernity. However, the exclusion of dirt from the social order makes dirt a health, moral, and status marker, and people with poor personal hygiene become potential pathogens, major forces of crime, arrogant and dangerous classes, who are naturally excluded from mainstream society.

3. The Acceptance of the Moral Metaphor of Personal Hygiene in Great Expectations

When moral and physical dirt are associated, dirt breaks out of the material category and becomes a “cultural construct and relative to the social system which produces it.” (Quabeck 121) In this cultural construct, line is drawn “between defilement and purity, clean and filthy.” (Quabeck 121) Those who strive to maintain this order attain high status through personal hygiene and are accepted into mainstream society, while those covered in dirt are disdained and excluded from mainstream society.

Havisham made use of personal hygiene to achieve her own self-marginalization. When Pip first enters the Satis, he gives a detailed description of Miss Havisham’s image. Miss Havisham has been wearing a white wedding dress for many years, which “had been white long ago” (60) and “was

faded and yellow" (60) already, and her clothes, the flowers she wore, and even herself "had withered" (60) and "without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud." (63) All of these indicate that "Miss Havisham has built a life, or a living death, around her own passion" (Easley 216). As an upper-class Miss Havisham should have enjoyed a luxurious life, but she used the neglect of personal hygiene and the disregard of personal image as a means to achieve the stillness of her own time and cut off the contact with the outside society. She definitely knows what bodies society prefers and what images society dislikes. "Bodies are never 'just themselves' in any meaningful way," (Gilbert 16) but belong to the whole society. The interpretation and attitude towards the body are affected by the overall social culture, and the body that is preferred by the social culture can be respected, while the one that is contrary to it will be hated. Therefore, The body is a social body, and it is in social conditions and in the "interweaving with subjectivity" (Gilbert 15) that the body takes on discourse and meaning. And it is by going against the body and hygiene discourse of the time that Miss Havisham achieves his self-isolation.

Miss Havisham's yellow wedding dress not only hides her broken heart, but also suggests that her morals have fallen. Miss Havisham's expression, her voice, and her dress are remarkably consistent-a representation of her death of heart. Her face is always sunken, showing an air of contemplation. Her face could not smile, even her smiling is a "weird smile" (107). Her voice is also so low that no one could feel any vitality in her. "Altogether, she had the appearance of having dropped body and soul, within and without, under the weight of a crushing blow." (64) Young Pip also seems to understand the relationship between appearance and heart, from Miss Havisham's external performance has been able to pry out her inner degradation, he does not realize at the moment that he is walking into Miss Havisham's trap, a victim of her hatred and moral degradation.

Miss Havisham's death is also linked to the yellowing dress. By the time of her death, Miss Havisham is apologetic and remorseful for hurting Pip, speaking to Pip in a tone of voice full of rare compassion, and even kneeling down to ask Pip's forgiveness for the hurtful thing she has done. When Pip left the Satis, the fire from the fireplace set the dress on fire, and the flames wrapped her body. David Penn holds the view that "*Great Expectations*, (is) a novel not at all lacking in just such lurid instances of 'divine justice'." (Penn 130) Miss Havisham's death due to the burning of her wedding dress is the best example of "divine justice", and it is in the punishment of Miss Havisham that makes Pip's forgiveness possible. To some extent, this interpretation is reasonable, but an important question is ignored in this kind of interpretation: why did the burning of the dress cause Miss Havisham's death and not the other way? Perhaps the moral metaphor of personal hygiene can offer an alternative interpretation. Miss Havisham's dirty house and the corpse wedding dress she wears cut her off from the world and "in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that, her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased." (431) Frustrated love makes her neglect personal hygiene, thus achieving self-isolation, and the deliberate neglect of personal hygiene even reinforces her moral degradation. Although spiritually she confesses, chagrins, to show her moral awakening, physically she needs to complete a ritual to complete a disintegration. The burning of the wedding dress makes her completely break with her former life, and reborn in the bath of fire, which also makes her walk out of the dirty house for the first time in the novel, even if it is for help. In treating Miss Havisham, the author also places special emphasis on the "white cotton wool" wrapped by the doctor and the "white sheet" (435) covered, although this makes her still dressed like a bride, but this pure white also allows her to return to the time before her self-isolation, to the time before moral degradation. All in all, Miss Havisham's tragic fate begins with wearing the wedding dress, falls in the yellowing of the wedding dress, and ended in the burning of the wedding dress. Her wedding dress from white to yellow witnesses her moral ups and downs.

4. The Critique of the Moral Metaphor of Personal Hygiene in Great Expectations

Dickens' personal hygiene writing can not be simply understood as material and realistic writing, but is wandering between body and spirit, as well as description and metaphor. Personal hygiene in Victorian period not only distinguishes between clean and dirty, but also forms a power order, a dualistic order that separates the two different bodies. This order does not care what class the body is attached to, what is good and what is evil, because it is already preconceived, through the dirt to confirm the identity of the person, and become a tool of inclusion and exclusion. "In this sense, its dangers are twofold: it may well be a source of infection and contagion, but its symbolic power is no less life-threatening" (Quabeck 131).

Mrs. Joe is a steadfast practitioner of personal hygiene, and the description of Mrs. Joe appearance is enough to show that she attaches great importance to hygiene. Mrs. Joe "with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin" (7). In fact, "Victorian painters and novelists put great aesthetic emphasis on the translucent 'bloom' of the female skin--simple 'natural' beauty from soap and water, with shining, well-brushed hair." (Smith 289) The word "prevailing" is an emphasis on women's translucent skin, indicating that Mrs. Joe not only knew the aesthetic at the time, but also used soap and water to approach the aesthetic trend. However, it seems that Mrs. Joe pays too much attention to cleanliness, and her skin is so clean that Pip cannot help thinking "whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap" (7). Nutmeg is hard, not as smooth as soap, and if you wash her face with nutmeg, of course, her complexion will be particularly red. Of course, young Pip does not understand the mystery of women's washing, and here the writer is obviously using the perspective of a child to satirize the cold and indifferent heart hidden under the clean appearance of Mrs. Joe. In addition, another characteristic of Mrs. Joe was "always wore a coarse apron" (7), cooking, cleaning the house almost occupied the whole life of Mrs. Joe. Women's housing is an important motif in 19th century literary writing. "It was predominantly women's role to create not just a physical but also a moral and an emotional environment for the family" (Kelley 104), and the physical, moral and emotional environment they create is unified. Cleanliness can not only improve the material environment of the family, but also demonstrate the virtues of women's diligence and self-discipline, and create a warm emotional environment for family members, so in the Victorian period. Soap gave Mrs. Joe red skin; apron is her representation of hard-working household; and the attention to personal hygiene had helped her secure her family status, and also been an important reason for the neighbors to praise her.

Another character in the novel who is always accompanied by the smell of soap is the lawyer Mr. Jaggers. Pip notices the first time he sees Mr. Jaggers that "I was glad of, for his hand smelt of scented soap" (88). The next time he sees Mr. Jaggers, Pip checked and identified him not only by his appearance, but also by "the smell of scented soap on his great hand" (146). In *Little Britain*, Pip explained the reason for Mr. Jaggers' love of washing his hands: when Mr. Jaggers had "been engaged on a case of a darker complexion than usual" (227), he went into the bathroom to wash his hands, face, and mouth; and after finishing washing, "he took out his penknife and scraped the case out of his nails" (227). As a lawyer, Jaggers does not have to seek the truth; his job is to exonerate people, even if he knows they're guilty. But Jaggers obviously has a conscience, he knows that although his behavior meets the professional requirements, but often challenges the bottom line of personal morality, so unconsciously formed the habit of washing hands with soap, in order to hide the inner guilt. After washing, "there was something so conclusive in the halo of scented soap which encircled his presence" (227), and the anxious people had no choice but to stop the idea of approaching him. As Harold Bloom once said, "as such we can understand the obsessive need to wash himself in scented soap at the end of each day--Dickens knew as well as Freud what was the classic ritual symbol of guilt." (Bloom 93) In addition, the removal of dirt implied the stability of middle-class morality, making his exterior more in line with the requirements of middle-class morality, and

making his heart seem to be sublimated, which signaled “to others, as well as to [himself], a supposedly secure rank in their social order” (Quabeck 122).

It is worth mentioning that “he had a closet in his room, fitted up for the purpose, which smelt of the scented soap like a perfumer’s shop.” (226) This closet not only separated the office area from the hand-washing area, but also separated the filth on the outside from the cleanliness on the inside. The functional division of Victorian rooms was itself not only a reflection of class, but also of morality: having a separate bathroom was the necessary way to achieve true self-respect because “every improvement in the house is an improvement in morality” (qtd. in Steinbach 13), “every important function of life required a separate room,” and that to proceed otherwise was “unwholesome [and] immoral.” (qtd. in Steinbach 21) Therefore, from washing hands to the functional zoning of the room, Mr. Jaggers has built a good image by strictly adhering to middle-class hygiene and ethics.

However, the more Mr. Jaggers tried to assert his image and moral status, the more the filth of the past that dominated his world, and the guilt he cannot be got rid of, which led him to an obsessive, pathological pursuit of personal hygiene. When he was done with a few cases, “he would wash his hands, and wipe them and dry them all over this towel” (226); when Pip and the other people left, Pip “found him in his dressing room surrounded by his stock of boots, already hard at it, washing his hands of us” (233); he washed his hands after he helped Pip with his letter; and even he washed his hands after he met Estella. Fear of contamination is one of the causes of obsessive compulsive disorder, which leads to those behaviors including excessive cleaning, disinfecting, hand washing, bathing, and any other things that helps prevent the spread of contamination. The habit of washing hands was a response to Mr. Jaggers’ inner unease, a culture-imposed choice, and a process in which he could make him calm down and solidify his middle-class status.

At the same time, Mr. Jaggers’ obsession with hand-washing illustrates the arbitrariness and uncertainty of the dichotomy marked by dirt. Personal hygiene, by utilizing of its relevant discourse “to charm the subject, help stabilize and construct the subject’s identity” (Han 95), makes the identity of subject more confusing. Under the neat appearance, it could be either the violent Mrs. Joe or Mr. Jaggers, who cannot get out of a dirty case. This implies the failure of the moral metaphor of personal hygiene and the unbalance of social order--the morally depraved man easily achieved a moral leap with personal hygiene.

5. Conclusion

For a long time, scholars, who do research on Dickens himself and Dickens’ novel, have focused on public health, and paid little attention to personal health related to body and house-keeping. By exploring the personal hygiene issues in *Great Expectations*, it is not difficult to find that Dickens takes Pip’s growth history as a bright line, and runs through the personal hygiene issues to create a distinct character image. As a middle class writer, Dickens could not get rid of the cultural metaphor of personal hygiene in the Victorian period, and deeply intertextualized reality and fiction, making the character and fate of the characters influenced by personal hygiene. As a reformer and politician, he also reflected on the ideological impact of health reform, keenly aware of the arbitrariness and uncertainty of the dichotomy marked by dirt, and called for objective and scientific evaluation criteria for morality. Although the novel is more than 160 years old, the clue of personal hygiene is still worth revisiting. From this novel, it can be concluded that some people get in line with the moral metaphor of personal hygiene, but the danger is that morally corrupt people whitewash themselves with the help of such discourse, which leads to a world of hypocrisy and a ethical predicament that the discourse of personal hygiene is alienated as a tool for self-cover-up. However, as Kelly (9) mentions in his work, the rules of personal hygiene are “unconscious” and “potent”. By exploring the history we can bring these rules into consciousness and thereby dilute their potency. The writing of personal hygiene in *Great Expectations* brings these rules to the surface and thus weaken even break these rules and the ethical predicament resulted by them.

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