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Dickens's "A Confession Found in a Prison in the Time of Charles the Second"

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Abstract: Dickens's short story "A Confession Found in a Prison in the Time of Charles the Second," set in the period of the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, around the 1680s, depicts the narrator's conflict with his nephew. The narrator goes on to kill his nephew and is subsequently tormented by the child appearing in his dreams. It is noteworthy that the conflicting revenge relationship between the nephew and his uncle is also applicable to the relationships that existed between the kings of the setting's period and their nephew: Charles II (and James II) and their nephew William of Orange. In the latter part of the 17th century, in the Third Anglo-Dutch War, England (his uncle: Charles II) attacked the Netherlands (William); however, William later went on to invade England, ousting the English king (another uncle: James II) in the Glorious Revolution. This work, with its theme of nephew and uncle, is elaboratively set in the period between the two historical events involving the clash between a nephew and his uncles. This covert association of the story with the great revolution of England indicates that a positive and pivotal meaning might be lurking underneath this gloomy work. This essay argues that this work is enmeshed with Dickens's conflict between concealing his dark past, his labour in the blacking warehouse during childhood, and his resolve to confront and unearth the agonising memory in order to rise to greater heights as a writer.

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As many critics have noted, Charles Dickens's childhood memory of labouring in Warren's Blacking Warehouse has deeply influenced a number of his novels.¹ It seems likely that his short story "A Confession Found in a Prison in the Time of Charles the Second" (referred to as "A Confession") also falls within the category of such works. This work covertly expresses Dickens's struggles to face his childhood self and confess it. The work discussed here was published in the third issue (18 April 1840) of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, a weekly periodical. This periodical was inaugurated by the publishing of Dickens's short stories and miscellaneous writings. However, due to poor sales, the periodical's publishing was soon monopolised by the novels *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Since these short stories were not being received well at the time, "A Confession" had not attracted much critical attention thus far. However, some have praised this work. As is well known, Edgar Allan Poe wrote that this short story "is a paper of remarkable power, truly original in conception, and worked out with great ability" (212).

Furthermore, Edith Smith Krappe argues that “A Confession” may have inspired Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” (84-88), and Richard M. Baker suggests that “A Confession” is one of the significant germs of Dickens’s final and unfinished work *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (281-85). While I agree that “A Confession” holds its importance in relation to Dickens’s or other writers’ works, this essay focus on considering “Confession” alone, which has not been fully analysed. I hope that this consideration will contribute to enriching future discussions concerning the story’s relation to other texts.

This essay aims to bring out Dickens’s hardship and resolution to confess his hidden past, which lay behind the narrator’s psychology and the uncle-nephew relationship described in the work. “A Confession” is a dark story, where the narrator is tormented by a sense of inferiority and eventually goes on to kill his nephew. Yet, having paid attention to the historical background of the work, it appears that some lightness is submerged behind the darkness. This short story is set between the late 1670s and the early 1680s during the reign of Charles II. Deborah A. Thomas claims that “the periods involved seem to hold little importance” (27); to be sure, the setting period may have nothing to do with the plot. However, the fact that detailed information about the period is given at the beginning of the story, whereas even characters’ names are never mentioned, seems to reflect, in some way, the author’s consciousness of or commitment to the period. It is noteworthy that the nephew-uncle conflict captured in the story is set in the period between the Third Anglo-Dutch War and the Glorious Revolution, the two historical events that remind us of the clash between the nephew (William of Orange, Stadtholder of the Netherlands) and his uncles (Kings of England, Charles II and James II). Given the assumption that Dickens knowingly placed the time just before the Glorious Revolution as the setting of the story, this essay proposes that the bright meaning for the author lurks underneath this work’s gloomy ending: Dickens’s fear and, simultaneously, ambition about reaching greater heights as a writer submerges in the undercurrent of the story. In other words, the narrator’s confession about his darkness represents Dickens’s struggle and resolution to verbalise his repressed past—the painful experience of the warehouse.

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The problem of the narrator’s conflict with his nephew resonates with the kinship conflicts seen in the two historical events that took place before and after the time at which the story was set. The narrator is afraid of his nephew, kills him, and is avenged via him being possessed by his nephew’s ghost in his dreams. The feud between the nephew and uncle also applies to the relationship between William of Orange and England’s two kings, namely Charles II and his successor James II, around the period in which the work is set. William was the son of Mary Henrietta Stuart, the sister of Charles II and James II.² Dickens was surely interested in William, as he praised the man in *A Child’s History of England*. In this book, Dickens reflected on the period of the Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678: the invasion of the Netherlands by the French King Louis XIV) and the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672-1674: England’s war against the Netherlands). The following is an excerpt from the book detailing his reflection on the period.

[W]ar was declared by France and England against the Dutch. But, a very uncommon man, afterwards most important to English history and to the religion and liberty of this land, arose among them, and for many long years defeated the whole projects of France. This was WILLIAM OF NASSAU, PRINCE OF ORAGNE, son of the last Prince of Orange of the same name, who married the daughter of Charles the First of England. He was a young man at this

time, only just of age; but he was brave, cool, intrepid, and wise. (505)

The setting placed at the beginning of "A Confession" is that of the time in which the treaty of Nimeguen (Nijmegen), which ended the Franco-Dutch War, was signed: "I held a lieutenant's commission in his Majesty's army, and served abroad in the campaigns of 1677 and 1678. The treaty of Nimeguen being concluded, I returned home..." (41). Historically, around the end of the war, Mary II, Charles II's niece, married William of Orange, which led England to become pro-Dutch and briefly participating in the war by being on the Dutch side. The beginning of the short work is considered to have been placed in this period. However, what I would like to focus on is that England was originally fighting against the Netherlands during this war, as shown in the above quote from *A Child's History of England*. Charles II declared war on the Netherlands during the French invasion of the Netherlands based on the Treaty of Dover, a secret pact signed in 1670 between Charles II and Louis XIV. In the treaty, Charles II promised to start a war against the Netherlands with the financial support of Louis XIV and to convert to Catholicism. The Third Anglo-Dutch War ran parallel to the Franco-Dutch War. In short, Charles II's fight against his (future) nephew William resonates with the uncle murdering his nephew in "A Confession." Furthermore, it should also be noted that the night before the execution of the narrator corresponds to the early 1680s, the time just before the Glorious Revolution (1688), when William and his wife Mary took the throne of England by replacing James II. With William's invading England during the revolution, James II was ousted from the position of the king. To sum up, the same structure as the one described in the short story—nephew-uncle revenge structure—can be seen in the historical events that unfurled in the setting era: English king (uncle) attacked the Dutch, whose leader was William (nephew); later, the nephew proceeded to England and drove out the English king (uncle) to become the king himself. Dickens, who, as many do, considers this revolution to be a crucial historical event (*in A Child's History of England*), must have been very mindful of the fact that "A Confession" is set in the period of the Stuart Restoration, a period that triggered the Glorious Revolution.³ Notably, the year 1677, mentioned at the beginning of "A Confession," was a turning point in England, paving the way for the revolution, since William and Mary got married in this year. Thus, it seems no coincidence that Dickens placed the story of the uncle-nephew conflict in the period of historical events involving the uncle-nephew conflict.

Considering the similarity between the nephew-uncle relationship in the work and the one in the historical background, one can find correspondence between the uncles (Charles II [or James II] and the narrator) as well as between the nephews (William and the child in the work). Furthermore, it is important to note that Dickens, who shares the story's authorship with the narrator and shares his name with Charles II, corresponds to Charles II (James II) and the narrator. The crucial question in this case is what the child in the work implies for Dickens. In other words, it is important to read Dickens' consciousness, as reflected in the child. Like the narrator who feared, killed, and buried the nephew, what did Dickens fear, (figuratively) kill, and conceal, and who (or what) was he going to be avenged by?

When one analyses the work, a probable assumption is that what frightened Dickens was the act of confession. In "A Confession," the nephew (the child) has a parallel relationship with confessing. As seen from the work's title, the confession is emphasised as the one to be "found," while the buried child is also repeatedly emphasised as the one to be "found" in the story: "the child would soon be found (45)" and "the boy would certainly be found" (46). The narrator's confession is discovered underground (the stone dungeon), just as a child is dug out of the earth. If a function of the nephew and the activity of the confession are identical in the work, Dickens's abhorrence can be considered to uncover something he

concealed. Just as the child reappeared underground, it might be that Dickens's suppression was about to return.

Before examining the specifics of the confession he was fearful of, we should confirm the possible double meaning that the confession carried in "A Confession." Although the confession in the work is dark and gloomy, the reason why Dickens set its story just before the Glorious Revolution might be because he vaguely recognised that confession also carries a positive connotation in some way. William's (nephew) attack on James II (uncle) during the Glorious Revolution has an honourable aspect, as Dickens in *A Child's History of England* refers to this revolution as "England's great and glorious Revolution" (529). The gloomy and bloody story of "A Confession" contrasts with the "glorious" bloodless revolution. However, while there is such a contrast, the story's revenge structure paralleling that of this bright historical event may indicate that the confession (which corresponds to the nephew in the story) implies a hidden pivotal meaning. In short, Dickens's confession may hold a dark but bright aspect.

This paper reviews the source of the narrator's fear of his nephew to approach and clarify the specifics of the writer's confession. The narrator's confession also focuses on events leading up to the murder of the child. It is noteworthy that one of the motives seems to have been the narrator's fright of his nephew's eyes: "I never could bear that the child should see me looking at him" (43). At the root of this fear is the fact that the child's eyes are exactly like those of the child's mother (the child is a living copy of the mother). When the narrator murdered his nephew, he was also frightened by her eyes through the child's eyes.

His mother's ghost was looking from his eyes. The sun burst forth from behind a cloud; it shone in the bright sky, the glistening earth, the clear water, the sparkling drops of rain upon the leaves. There were eyes in everything. The whole great universe of light was there to see the murder done. (44)

The narrator, once mentioned, wished for the nephew to die and wanted the child's heritage. However, it is noted that the killing was eventually done in a way that did not accomplish the acquisition of the heritage: he must continue insisting that the child was not dead but lost or stolen (45). The fact that the plan to acquire the inheritance was not carefully achieved may indicate that the heritage was not actually the main motive behind the killing; there could have been a more impulsive motive behind it. Again, as far as the work is concerned, it was his mother and her eyes that he emphasised as the cause for him to hate his nephew: "I was afraid of her; she haunted me; her fixed and steady look comes back upon me now, like the memory of a dark dream, and makes my blood run cold. She died shortly after giving birth to a child—a boy" (42). The narrator's fear of her gaze right before mentioning her death highlights that the narrator is deeply haunted by the eyes. The reason for his fright is illuminated in the first half of the piece.

His wife knew me well. I never struggled with any secret jealousy or gall when she was present but that woman knew it as well as I did. I never raised my eyes at such times but I found hers fixed upon me; I never bent them on the ground or looked another way but I felt that she overlooked me always. (42)

The narrator fundamentally fears that she sees through his own heart, his own inner inferiority, and his own bitterness. Indeed, the focus of the beginning part of the narrator's confession concerns his "secret jealousy or gall." He confronts his inner darkness through the eyes of others (the mother and her boy) and struggles against it with greater fear.

In light of this, it may be his secret gall that has made Dickens waver about whether or not to confess.

It could be his sense of inferiority that he wants to push down, but that is rising. What is the inner darkness that plagues Dickens? It could be Dickens's traumatic childhood experience, that is, "[t]he secret memory of the blacking warehouse" (Alexander 4), what the critics call it. When Dickens was twelve years old, his father was imprisoned for debts. Because of this, he was sent to work in a blacking warehouse at that age and experienced the strains of horrible poverty, which lay behind the prosperity that England witnessed during the first half of the 19th century. He kept this experience publicly hidden for many years and did not confide it to his own children during his life; he did not even mention it when he wrote this short story. In 1847, as his writing career was taking off, he confessed this past to John Forster, and this biographer included this painful experience in the biography of Dickens, which was published after Dickens's death.

For Dickens, this terrible memory significantly influenced his works. Walter Allen states the following in this regard:

The blacking factory episode does not account for Dickens's genius, but it does, I believe, explain some of the forms his genius took, and it throws light on much that is otherwise baffling both in his art and his life. It explains why we so often find at the centre of his novels the figure of the lost, persecuted, or helpless child[.] (Allen 166)

Thus, the helpless, pathetic, buried child (who serves the same function as confession) in "A Confession" may represent a phantom of his own childhood self that he had suppressed or concealed. However, just as the buried and hidden child in the work reappeared in the narrator's dreams and finally from the earth, the memories of Dickens's incarcerated boyhood would have welled up in his mind, haunting him. The writer seems to have been tormented by dreams about this misery time, even after his success as a writer. "I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life" (Forster 53). In short, if we have to assume from the short story as to what Dickens feared, it was perhaps the gaze of his pathetic boyhood past-self in the warehouse.

However, the return of this repression could also be interpreted as a positive aspect, as we have supposed earlier in terms of this work's relation to the Glorious Revolution. In fact, as we have seen in the above quotation by Allen, it is well known that his traumatic experience served as the source of his works. Confronting this darkness may have been the mission of the writer. For Dickens, it was essential to put this darkness into words, be it in his fiction, or otherwise. Nonetheless, this had been difficult for him, which can be understood from the confession he made to Forster.

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every-day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. (53)

Dickens further states the following: "That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is, as I have said already, utterly beyond my power to tell. No man's imagination can overstep the reality" (57-58).

It is the verbalisation of this unspoken experience that went on to add weight to Dickens's work. Thus, "A Confession," written before seriously dealing with this memory, may express not only his

struggle but also his resolve to face the darkness of his past. Even before writing this short story, Dickens had written works such as *Oliver Twist*, which evoked his experiences in the blacking warehouse. However, as Ned Lukacher notes, around the time he started *Master Humphrey's Clock*, Dickens, who had not visited the neighbourhood around Warren Warehouse for a long time, was able to do so, and it was around the same time that his writings had become freshly mature (292-93).⁴ In the 1840s, after writing this short story, he started to even more closely touch upon this part of his past, especially by writing about it in "autobiographical fragment," although this remained unpublished during his lifetime.⁵ Moreover, he wrote *David Copperfield* (published in 1849-50), an autobiographical novel in which he brought out the elements that intensely resonated with his agonising childhood experiences.⁶ Given his circumstances around the 1840s as well as his struggle concerning confessing, seen in "A Confession," this story can be regarded as one of the turning points in his confrontation with the secret memory.

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Considering the possibility that the short story contains Dickens's conflict of whether to confess the secret past, the narrator, who skilfully verbalises the darkness despite his secretiveness, is ambivalent for Dickens. For Dickens, who could not narrate his own past, the narrator in this story might have been the ideal writer, who states:

I will set down the naked truth without disguise. I was never a brave man, and had always been from my childhood of a secret, sullen, distrustful nature. I speak of myself as if I had passed from the world; for while I write this, my grave is digging, and my name is written in the black-book of death. (42)

After the corpse is released from the earth, the narrator goes to jail, confesses his past, and finally faces the fear of dying. If, as Edgar Johnson points out, Dickens's lifelong obsession with prison stems from the wound of his childhood misery memory (249), the return of the repressive memory as he wrote this short story would have finally given Dickens a sense of prison. Dickens may have felt that the confession of his darkness would give him a fear that could be compared to death. Even so, this text seems to indicate that the surfacing of the confession was at the same time a revolutionary turning point for Dickens, which would have taken him to greater heights.

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Notes

1. For instance, see Welsh 2-7 and Allen 165-66.
2. Regarding the Restoration Monarchy period, this essay refers to Harris, Hutton, and Troost.
3. In fact, *A Child's History of England* practically ends with a section on James II, which closes with the revolution; while he also wrote the subsequent history of England after the revolution, it was extremely brief.
4. Additionally, although he pays no attention to "A Confession," LeKacher states that "*Master Humphrey's Clock* is Dicken's first, and understandably abortive, effort to master the memory of what he calls 'the slow agony' of his youth" (298).

5. Patten claims that Dickens endeavoured to face his past life in his works during the 1840s. See 269-91.
6. On the connection between *David Copperfield* and Dickens's boyhood past in the blacking warehouse described in the autobiographical fragment, see Nina pp. xv-xxii and Welsh 156-63. Later, Dickens went on to write other biographical works such as *Great Expectations*, a first-person narrative work that touches on this part of his past. See Welsh 176-77 and Daleski 241-42.

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