



## **CHARLES DICKENS'S A TALE OF TWO CITIES: A HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities is generally considered as the most successful historical novel ever written in English Literature. In this novel Dickens brings out the historical side of the Victorian age with examples and details of the French Revolution and the Victorian revolt. His vision of revolution was probably influenced by a personal day dream only he can fathom. But he is able to render his day dream in terms of publicly Victorian iconography. It is not a revolutionary novel in the sense of political revolts but in terms of social revolts. It covers not only two historical revolutions but also two generations with many similar problems and revolts of their own. Therefore, an attempt has been made by the researcher to analyze the novel from historical point of view.*

**Keywords:** *Historical, Political, Revolution, Revolts, Victorian.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A Historical novel is a composite material with a portion of history embedded in a matrix of novel. A Tale of Two Cities is titled appropriately as it is the story of two cities i.e. England and Revolutionary France. Dickens goes into more detail about Revolutionary France in history as far as the social structure, setting and the events are concerned which occurred during the revolution. He portrays the atmosphere of England and France. The novel is a dramatic combination of the individual and the social concerns of the Victorian age. It is primarily a novel:

*...which, through the distancing medium of a historical melodrama, critically evaluates the conditions of contemporary mid-Victorian England and*

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*imaginatively explores one of the possible consequences of that condition. Though the novel opens in 1775, the imaginative world created in the scenes set in England is, in its essential characteristics, that of England in the 1850s. (Brown 115)*

The novel is built on the episode of Dr. Manette's unjust imprisonment. Its whole working out is concerned with the effects of that unjust deprivation of light and joy: effects, which entangle everyone round the Doctor and recoil on his own head in unforeseen ways. The Doctor's fate is thus for Dickens both a symbol of the French revolution and a symbol of his fate, caught in the maddening whirl of his personal life at that time. The novel is an attempt to remind the English people of a revolution's dangers. The French Revolution was a great political upheaval caused by the evils of taxation and land owning system which had oppressed the lower classes in France. Dickens highlights some of the events of the French Revolution such as the storming of the Bastille, the senseless fury of the mob, the reign of terror, and the indiscriminate executions carried out by the revolutionary tribunals after perfunctory trials of the suspects. His main purpose is to show how the mob, once it gets out of control, can become as irrational and brutal as its oppressors had previously been. These historical events are also important in so far as they impinge upon and influence deeply the course of the lives of certain private individuals who had nothing to do with those events. The domestic life of a group of individuals is thus interwoven with the great public events which shook the whole country.

*A Tale of Two Cities* is not a straight history of the French Revolution. That is why no historical characters actually appear in the story line. The other reason is that Dickens distrusted the idealism of such revolutionary leaders as Marat and Robespierre because of the monstrous deeds they justified in the name of Liberty; rather it is the revelation of what Forster terms 'the hidden life' of certain imagined characters who are used to carry varied reflections of Dickens's own temperament. In this connection Alter Robert observes:

*What Dickens is ultimately concerned with in A Tale of Two Cities is not a particular historical event – that is simply his chosen dramatic setting – but rather the relationship between history and evil, how violent oppression breeds violent rebellion which becomes a new kind of oppression. His account of the ancient regime and the French Revolution is a study in civilized man's vocation for proliferating moral chaos, and in this one important regard this novel is the most compellingly modern of his novels. (137)*

In the eighteen fifties Charles Dickens was largely concerned with social problems in England, particularly those relating to the condition of the poor and 'the Condition-of-



England Question' which might provoke a mass reaction of the scale of the French Revolution. In a letter written in 1855, he pointedly refers to the unrest of the time:

*I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smouldering, instead of blazing openly, that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the first Revolution, and is in danger of being turned ... into such a devil of a conflagration as never has been beheld since. (Collins 42)*

The novel opens in 1775, with a comparison of England and pre-revolution France. While drawing parallels between the two countries, Dickens also alludes to his own time: "the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only" (*Tale of Two Cities* 3). He depicts both the countries as rife with poverty, injustice and violence because of the irresponsibility of the ruling elite. Despite violence and injustice happening in both the countries, and the inept rule of those in power, everyone is convinced that the world will go on, as it is, forever.

Dickens provides an intriguing view of the French Revolution and the social structure of the period. Certainly, this novel had Dickens's affection. It is in fact the best story he ever wrote because of its vigorous story, energetic manner of telling, and engaging plot. This novel must be counted as one of his best novels despite its so called melodramatic and rhetorical excesses. Dickens used the novel to draw attention to the social problems and confusions of his own time. It is one of only two Dickens's novels that are not set in the nineteenth century England, yet the society of England in 1859 was remarkably like the France of 1789. At both times, the poor were far below the upper classes, and the poor had no influence upon public affairs. The rich did nothing to help for fear that the poor would want to better themselves when they worked better as cheap labour. The poor suffered from overcrowding, hunger, and repetitive labour, and long hours of work. The prevailing thought in Dickens's time was that the aristocrats of France persecuted the poor until they were driven to revolt. Some political thinkers of Dickens's time thought that England needed a revolution similar to that of France. Dickens, along with the most other people, believed that given the situation in England at that time the English people would explode into a murderous mob at any moment. The novel is an attempt to remind the English of a revolution's danger.

It is a novel of guilt and retribution, which operates at both the personal and the historical levels. It denounces the kind of retribution which was brought about by the French Revolution, based on hatred, vengeance and spite. It suggests that only by forgiving, or pardoning guilty people, can individuals escape from the cycle of crime and revenge that causes endless sufferings. This is especially evident in the fate of Dr. Manette, who has



unjustly endured solitary confinement for eighteen years in the Bastille, for having written a letter revealing the cruel and criminal activities of the Evremonde brothers. When he is transported to England, he can learn once again to establish contact with reality, although he is still prone to fits of distraction. By the time the story ends, he is still a “helpless, inarticulately murmuring, wandering old man” (*Tale of Two Cities* 348). The greatest burden of responsibility rests with the self-indulgent, exploitative and unjust French aristocracy. As one sows, one must reap, and Madame Defarge alludes to the moral rule that evil brings with itself its own seed of consequences.

In this novel, Dickens shows the struggle between those who have power and privilege and those who do not. The French aristocrats exercised complete and more-or-less unfettered freedom to persecute and deprive those of the lower classes. It is shown by Jerry Cruncher’s insistence that the strict and violent sentence of quartering is barbarous. Later when the tables have turned, it is the peasants who use their newly achieved power to persecute the aristocrats through mass executions and imprisonment. When Darnay is first interred in La Force Prison, he notices that the rough looking men are in charge and the prisoners are polite and civil. Jerry Cruncher is deeply affected by the French revolution and he, more than any other English character in the novel, would have had reason to be inspired by the uprising of the French poor, but as a good Englishman, his avowal that its bloody sights have caused him to reconsider his grave occupation of robbing indicates that he, at least, recognizes the futility in avenging violence with violence. France is struggling with excessive torture and social issues while England is having problems with crime and police corruption.

Dickens is very graphic in describing the revolutionaries and their tendencies towards violence. Explaining this aspect of Dickens’s attitude, John Kucich, a noted Dickens scholar, observes:

*On the one hand, in the initial stages of the French revolution in France, it is difficult not to sympathize with the labouring class’s pursuit of freedom.... On the other hand, of course, the meaning of rebellion in France soon sours... it soon becomes clear that the mob’s struggle for justice is totally outstripped by their brute satisfaction in the violence of dominance. (40)*

Dickens is very clear in his beliefs regarding revolution, oppression, and violence. Although he is sympathetic to the impoverished, he is vehemently against violent revolutions. Social disorder is dehumanizing and chaotic, and he believed that revolutions in general were evil. It is obvious that Dickens sympathizes with the labouring class in the beginning of the French revolution. After a while, the mob becomes vengeful and tyrannical towards the noble class,



and it is clear that Dickens does not appreciate their hypocritical methods of achieving freedom.

Dickens also suggests although obliquely that there was a subtle stratification in the society of Victorian England. At the top was a well-bred and purse-proud aristocracy. The source of their power was their estate, which kept them beholden to none. They constituted the ruling elite. Deference showed to them was “a tribute to birth, education and breeding” (Leavis 110). They excelled in prestige the upper class people or rather the admitted upper class people who had thrived on trade and commerce. Just below the upper class there was the upper middle-class, who also had gained status by industry. The middle class consisted of the humanity comfortable in varying circumstances. It was to this class that Dickens himself belonged. At the bottom of Victorian society were the lower class people and the extremely poor ones. They included the labour class also. Commenting on class-consciousness, Trevelyan says:

*The least calamity or the taint of social evil reduced them to destitution and starvation. But in spite of the efforts made by the class-conscious gentry, the rigid wall had started giving way. Many of the wealthier industrialists had passed into the ranks of the upper class by self-assertion or by marriage. (517)*

In this novel, Dickens deeply sympathizes with the plight of the French peasantry and emphasizes their need for liberation. Through the Marquis Evremonde the novelist successfully paints a picture of a vicious aristocracy that shamelessly exploits and oppresses the nation's poor. Dickens condemns this oppression and condemns the peasants' strategies in overcoming it. For in fighting cruelty with cruelty, the peasants cause no true revolution; rather they only perpetuate the violence that they themselves had suffered. Dickens makes his stance clear in his suspicious and cautionary depictions of the mob. His most concise and relevant view of revolution comes in the final chapter in which he notes the slippery slope down from the oppressed to the oppressor. “Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kin” (*Tale of Two Cities* 464). Though Dickens sees the French Revolution as a great symbol of transformation, he emphasizes that its violent means were ultimately antithetical to its end.

Dickens's remark about the genesis of the novel in the Collins melodrama, observes, G. Robert Stange, “helps emphasize the fact that in the novel Sydney Carton's sacrificial death and more important, the whole theme of violent death and regeneration must be regarded as the main idea” (84). Dickens originally thought of calling the book ‘Buried Alive’ and at its heart lie the images of death, and, much less certainly, of resurrection. The relationship between death and birth on the one hand, and imprisonment and freedom on the other,



becomes intelligible when one realizes that Dickens was deeply influenced by Thomas Carlyle's vision of history as revealed in *The French Revolution* (1837). Thus as portrayed in the novel, humanity evolves through successive stages of destruction and reconstruction. Each new age, like the phoenix, was, for Carlyle, born out of the ashes of its predecessor, so that the Victorian age of scientific and industrial progress was a product of the destruction of the eighteenth century, which, as the famous opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* assert, was both an age of enlightenment and of superstition, brutality, injustice and abuse of privilege. The cataclysm that engulfs and sweeps away the ancient regime epitomized in the novel by the Marquis de Saint Evremonde, is an inevitable consequence of its own excesses and failings.

Dickens's treatment of the French Revolution shows that violence leads to violence that Prison is a consequence of prison, and that hatred is a reward of hatred. He wanted that Government should not allow people to become so frustrated and angry that they are compelled to revolt and become not only violent, but also ruthlessly violent. If all French noblemen had been as willing to give up their class privileges as Darnay, and if all French intellectuals had been as keen to expose social abuses as Dr. Manette, there might have been no revolution or there would at least have been no revolution of the same horrific dimensions. Dickens never forgets that the French Revolution was born of unspeakable suffering, intolerable oppression, and heartless indifference. Society has been diseased before the fever broke out. Dickens's views about the French Revolution as stated in the final chapter the novel are contained in the following expression:

*“Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind”* (464).

There are many scenes connected with the French Revolution. Early in the novel readers are given a picture of hunger and poverty which is rampant in the suburb of Saint Antoine in Paris. This is followed by an account of the cruelty of the Marquis Evremonde. The murder of the Marquis and the burning down of the chateau are certainly awful, but a more awful situation is the storming of the Bastille. The account of the march of an armed mob led by Monsieur and Madame Defarge, and the assault on the Bastille are certainly awe-inspiring; but luckily the fortress falls without much resistance and, therefore, without much bloodshed. Readers are shocked, when Madame Defarge with her own hands cuts off the head of the Governor of the Bastille and when, soon afterwards, old Foulon and his son-in-law are hanged mercilessly. Dickens describes with frantic excitement and keen relish the horrible execution of Foulon amidst the wild shrieks and cries:



*Once, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; twice, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; then, the rope was merciful, and held him, and his head was soon upon a pike, with grass enough in the mouth for all Saint Antoine to dance at the sight of. (279)*

John Bayley justly remarks that “Dickens had a perfectly healthy interest in murder and hanging” (92). In the insistence of Dennis, the Hangman in *Barnby Rudge*, that all the arrested papists must be hanged, may be discerned the desire of Dickens himself to see and enjoy the sight of execution and Dickens’s wish may be taken to be representative of the popular wish of early and mid-Victorian age, “in which the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics.” (Gissing 7) At the time of the trial of Charles Darnay, the accused is hanged, beheaded and quartered by the crowd. As the fervour and gusto of the description shows, he is ravishingly hanged but the same is also condemned by Dickens. The statement of Ivor Brown that “public executions were entirely detestable to him should be taken with a grain of salt” (62).

That Dickens had a prison-haunted mind has a psychological explanation; it may be traced back to his childhood when, at the age of twelve, he had worked under horrible conditions in the prison like blacking factory and had to pay visits to his father in the Marshalsea. The prison image, which cast a deep impression on him at this tender age, became indelible, and it could not be blotted out even by the years of affluence and prosperity enjoyed by him in the later period of his life. Till the last days of his life the memories of this period made his heart ache. These horrible conditions prevailed in the prison when Dickens was a boy but “by the end of Dickens’s life, the penal system had settled in the form which it kept on until the twentieth century” (Collins 8). But Dickens does not take note of the gradual process of reform and dwells mostly upon his personal painful memories of childhood, when he depicts the prisons, especially those for debtors. Commenting on this aspect, Vallance says:

*The other sources which contributed to Dickens’s prison obsession are his interest in Gothic tales and picaresque novels, the social reality which was not rapidly and satisfactorily amenable to the efforts of prison reforms, and interest taken by his readers in reading the harrowing descriptions of how the prisoners were dealt with in the prisons, the instruments of maintaining law and order. The shadow of the prison hangs over nearly all of Dickens’s novels. (qtd. in Vallance 121)*

Dickens was moved by the spectacle of the young prisoners in Newgate. Chesterton explained to a Parliamentary Committee in 1850 that the prisoners were locked up in cells for



twelve hours a day in all seasons; the cells were unlighted – which, he agreed, was objectionable but he did not regret that they were unheated too. There was no heating system in the prison. The opposite danger of enervating the prisoners through over- heating was greater.

Dickens describes a dozen of prisoners he had visited. Some of them he judges to be desperate villains, others to be terrible humbugs in their professions of virtue and of gratitude for the day which brought them to this prison. But the emphasis laid on the pathos and horror of their situation –

*“his lip trembled .... He gazed about him –Heaven knows how wearily! ...’ – ‘... a helpless, crushed, and broken man’ – ‘She was very penitent and quiet; had come to be resigned, she said; and had a peace at mind ... but ... she burst into tears, and ... sobbed, poor thing!’” (Gray 46). These phrases are typical of the tone.*

Prisons and imprisonment have a conspicuous role in the novel. Dickens directs the attention of his readers to the horrible sufferings of Dr. Manette in the Bastille. An unjust imprisonment for a long duration of eighteen years breaks his spirit and drives him to insanity. His personality is lamentably damaged by the long solitary confinement. Prison sinks into his blood and makes him a physical as well as spiritual wreck. Even after five years of freedom, he is not free from the prison taint. At the time of Lucie’s marriage, the submerged prison image comes to the surface, as it does in the case of old Dorrit. He relapses into his old prison world and resumes his old prison-occupation of making shoes.

The oppressiveness of penal time is illustrated in the litany of eighteen years that Mr. Lorry dreams before retrieving the Doctor, and in the count of the brutally tortured woman who lies bound and repeats her twelve-count monologue until her death, and Charles Darnay’s marking the hours by the chimes of the church bell. Dickens’s descriptions of the harsh punishments given for minor offences in both France and England connects the two regimes and serves as an implicit warning to Dickens’s fellow countrymen that a bloody revolution is the result of wrongs done in the name of people. Thus prisons and madhouses have always had strong attraction for Dickens. He was friendly with several important prison Governors, both because he was interested in their work and because he was active in several good causes affecting their clients. He was the most prominent literary supporter of the Ragged Schools during his early years, and between 1846 and 1858 he devised and virtually ran a ‘Home for Fallen Women’.





Dickens's interest in crime and its treatment is in many respects akin to his concern for education, for both were important contemporary issues involving questions of social efficiency and social justice. But in both the cases these issues operated on a deeper emotional force than simply the good conscience of a topically minded publicist. It is a commonplace of Dickens's criticism that his sympathy for suffering and neglected children, which lies at the root of his educational concern, drew much of its strength from the traumatic experiences of his own childhood. George Orwell argues that Dickens shows a deep understanding of criminals. Although he is well aware of the social and economic causes of crime, he often seems to feel that when a man has once broken the law, he has put himself outside the human society. As soon as he comes up against crime or the worst depths of poverty, he shows traces of the "I've always kept myself respectable habit of mind" (29).

Thus in *A Tale of Two Cities*, he deals with the victims of law who do not strain their charity by being guilty of those major crimes against the person and against property which tend to arouse indignation, disgust and desire for revenge. Manette is a good man, an innocent victim of an oppressive regime which had political reasons for wanting him out of the way. Pentonville, built to receive convicts with sentences of not less than fifteen years, raises the more normal problems of crime and punishment and Dickens's observations on prison in 1850 are related to his repudiation of the modern American and the ancient regime French versions of solitary confinement. The crisis in Dickens's personal life was a kind of revolution, which corresponded to the external revolution with which he had to deal in this novel. The French Revolution which deeply affected the destiny of the characters in the novel also symbolizes the revolution which overtook Dickens as a man. This novel is an escape from the torments of his personal struggle and combines his bent towards social criticism with the point of view of the historical novel. In this novel, it is an entire system of legalized oppression that lies behind the picturesque horrors of the French Revolution. Most obvious of Dickens's social intentions was a satirical exposure of particular institutions that were held responsible for much of the vice and misery of the time.

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