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REVIEW ARTICLE

CHARLES DICKENS SPECIAL REFERENCES TO HIS NOVEL A TALE OF TWO CITIES: THEMES, STYLE & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Charles Dickens Special References To His Novel a Tale of Two Cities: Themes, Style & Historical Context

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian era, and one of the most popular of time, responsible for some of English literature's most iconic characters.

Many of his novels, with their recurrent theme of social reform, first appeared in magazines in serialized form, a popular format at the time. Unlike other authors who completed entire novels before serialization, Dickens often created the episodes as they were being serialized. The practice lent his stories a particular rhythm, punctuated by cliffhangers to keep the public looking forward to the next installment. The continuing popularity of his novels and short stories is such that they have never gone out of print.

His work has been praised for its mastery of prose and unique personalities by writers such as George Gissing and G.K. Chesterton, though the same characteristics prompted others, such as Henry James and Virginia Woolf, to criticize him for sentimentality and implausibility.

His early years seem to have been idyllic, although he though he thought himself a "very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of boy". He spent time outdoors, but also read voraciously, especially the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. He spoke, later in life, of his poignant memories of childhood, and of his near photographic memory of the people and events, which he used in his writing. His father's brief period as a clerk in the navy pay office afforded Charles a few years' private education at William Giles's School, in Chatham.

This period came to an abrupt end when JOHN Dickens spent beyond his means and was imprisoned in the Marshal sea debtor's prison in southward, London. Shortly afterwards, the rest of his family joined him - except Charles, who boarded with family friend Elizabeth Roy lance in Camden Town. Mrs. Roy lance was "a reduced old lady, long known to our family", whom dickens later immortalized, "with a few alterations and embellishments"; as" Mrs. Pip chin ", in Dombey & Son. Later , he lived in a "back _attic….at the house of an insolvent-court agent…in Lant Street in The borough….he was a fat, good-natured, kind old gentleman, with a quit old wife; and he had a very innocent grown-up son; these three were the inspiration for the Garland family in The Old Curiosity Shop.

On Sundays, Dickens and his sister Fanny, allowed out from the Royal Academy of Music, spent the day at the Marshal Sea. (Dickens later used the prison as a setting in Little Doritt.) To pay for his board and to help his family, Dickens began working ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse, on Hungerford Stairs, near the present Charring Cross railway station. He earned six shillings a week pasting labels on shoe polish. The strenuous – and often cruel-work conditions, the rig ours of which he believed were unfairly borne by the poor.

THEMES

Order and Disorder

The story of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place during the turbulent years of the French Revolution. Dickens stresses the chaos of Revolutionary France by using images of the ocean. He calls the Paris mob a "living sea," and compares Ernest Defarge to a man caught in a whirlpool. Defarge and his wife are both at the center of revolutionary activity in Paris, just as their lives are at the center of the whirlpool. Order breaks down once again in the second chapter of the third book, "The Grindstone." "Dickens deliberately set Darnay's return to Paris and arrest at the time of the September Massacres," writes Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, "a four-day execution of 1,089 prisoners from four Paris prisons, condemned in minutes each by … 'sudden Courts of Wild Justice.'" Contrasted to the chaos of Paris is the order of England: Dr. Manette's peaceful home in Soho is a place of refuge for Darnay, Carton, and Mr. Lorry, while even Tellson's Bank serves as a

center of calmness in the whirlpool of Revolutionary Paris.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Death, burial, and resurrection are themes that Dickens returns to again and again in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The first book of the novel, "Recalled to Life," traces the resurrection of Dr. Manette, who has been held in prison for almost twenty years. Prisons, for Dickens, are symbolic of the grave—a comparison that he makes throughout his works, and which may be related to his father's imprisonment in the debtors' prison at Marshalsea. Mr. Lorry, who travels to Paris in 1775 to secure the doctor's release, views himself as literally digging up Dr. Manette's body. He fancies that the doctor has been buried for so long that he will fall to pieces upon being liberated: "Got out at last, with earth hanging around his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust." Even the doctor's daughter Lucie, whom he has never seen, believes that the person who will emerge from the prison will be a ghost rather than a living man. Like a man brought back to life, Manette cannot quite shake the hold his burial and rebirth has on his mind. He reverts to his cobbling—a sign of his madness contracted in prison—during periods of stress, but he is finally redeemed by his daughter's love and his own forgiveness of Darnay for the crimes of the St. Evremondes.

Other characters are also absorbed in Dickens's death imagery. Jerry Cruncher, the Tellson's Bank messenger, is also a "resurrection man"—a person who steals fresh corpses from graveyards and sells them to medical schools for use as anatomy specimens. Charles Darnay is imprisoned and released twice in the course of the novel; the second time, it takes another death, Sydney Carton's, to secure Darnay's freedom. Madame Defarge, consumed by a desire for vengeance, finds her death in a tussle with Miss Pross. In addition, in his final moments Carton foresees the deaths of a large number of minor characters, including the spies Barsad and Cly, the revolutionary leaders Defarge and the woman known as The Vengeance, and the judge and jury who condemned Darnay to death. Revolutionary anarchy and hatred consume these people, but the Darnays, Dr. Manette, Mr. Lorry, and especially Carton, are redeemed through their love and self-sacrifice.

MEMORY AND REMINISCENCE

A Tale of Two Cities is a historical novel, about events approximately seventy years past when Dickens wrote the work. For the author in *A Tale of Two Cities*, memory is often a trap, pulling people into an abyss of despair. Madame Defarge's hatred of aristocrats in general and St. Evremonde in particular is based on her memory of the rape and deaths of her siblings at his hands. However, it can also be a force for redemption. It is Dr. Manette's memory of his dead wife, seen in his daughter's face, that begins his process of resurrection from the grave of his prison and madness. "Darnay … listens to the voices from his past," states Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*; "his desire to right the wrongs of his family is primarily due to his mother's reliance on him to do so." Perhaps most interesting, however, is Sydney Carton and his relationship to memory. His colleague C. J. Stryver calls him "Memory Carton" for his brilliant legal mind. Dickens's portrayal of Carton, however, shows him inspired by the memory of his love for Lucie to renounce his passive life. "When Carton dies with the words 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done,' he is renouncing the mental prison that has prevented him from making something of his life," writes Glancy; "he is living dynamically, as Doctor Manette does, and even if for him the action will soon be over, its repercussions will be felt for as long as the Darnay family survives."

STYLE

SETTING

The chief characteristic of *A Tale of Two Cities* that sets it apart from Dickens's other novels is its historical setting. Most of the author's works comment on contemporary English society; *A Tale of Two Cities* does this, too, but not as directly as, say, David Copperfield or Great Expectation. Dickens contrasts late eighteenth-century Paris and London both to advance the plot and to draw conclusions about the nature of freedom and the redeeming power of love. The novel begins in England, and most of the first book takes place in that country. In the second book, chapters alternate between the English and the French settings, and the third is set almost entirely in France. "At the beginning of the novel," writes Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities*: *Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, "Dickens paints a grim picture of both countries. They both had kings who believed in their divine right to rule. English spirituality had deteriorated into communing with spirits and other superstitious practices.… France he says, was less given over to such spiritual revelations, but had instead a clergy that inflicted cruel punishments for minor offenses." In England minor legal offenses were often punished with hanging. At the end of the novel, Dickens contrasts the two countries in the persons of Frenchwoman Madame Defarge and Englishwoman Miss Pross; in the struggle, however, he portrays not the triumph of one country over another, but the triumph of love over hatred.

ANTITHESIS

One of the most notable devices that Dickens uses in *A Tale of Two Cities* is the contrast of thesis and antithesis. The opening words of the novel introduce this conflict. Most of the major themes of the novel are summed up in these lines: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of

wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." Characters mirror and oppose each other. For example, Madame Defarge's experiences mirror those of Dr. Manette. Defarge's sister is raped and her brother is murdered by the Marquis St. Evremonde; Manette witnesses the crime and is imprisoned by the aristocratic criminal. Ernest Defarge and Mr. Lorry mirror each other; they both regard themselves as businessmen and they both care for Dr. Manette. However, while Defarge becomes consumed by hate and will eventually die under the guillotine, Mr. Lorry is redeemed by his love for the Darnays and escapes France in their company. These conflicts, which Dickens pursues throughout the novel, are resolved by Sydney Carton's sacrifice for love of Lucie. He concludes with a positive statement of goodness: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done, it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known."

DOPPELGANGER

The device of the *doppelganger*, or identical double, is central to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton are physically nearly identical, and some critics suggest that they are psychologically two sides of the same psyche. When Darnay is accused of spying and placed on trial in England, his lawyer, C. J. Stryver, secures his release. Stryver discredits the prosecution witness, who upon seeing Carton can no longer swear that Darnay was the man he saw spying. The climax of the novel, in which Carton takes Darnay's place on the execution grounds, is dependent on their close physical resemblance. The fact that both Carton and Darnay are in love with the same woman—Lucie Manett—echoes the physical resemblance between the two. In other ways, however, the two are opposed. Darnay, for instance, is consumed with the need to undo the evils that his uncle, the Marquis St. Evremonde, has inflicted on people. He makes his nearly-fatal trip to Paris in order to try to rescue Gabelle, a former family servant, but he is unsuccessful; he is caught, imprisoned, and sentenced to be executed. On the other hand Carton, who reveals to Lucie that he has previously lived a life of idleness, is successful in his bid to release Darnay from prison. Ironically Darnay, who has lived an upright, moral life, is successful only as a passive figure in his marriage. Carton, who has lived an immoral life of drunkenness and idleness, is successful in his activity, although the price of his success is his life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place in a time some seventy years before Dickens was writing the novel, it does indirectly address contemporary issues with which the author was concerned. During the 1780s—the period in which the novel was set—England was a relatively peaceful and prosperous nation. Its national identity was caught up in a long war with France which the French Revolution First interrupted, then continued. The ideals of the French Revolution were imported to England by political and literary radicals such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Many people, especially the English aristocracy and middle classes, feared these revolutionary values, seeing in them a threat to their prosperous and stable way of life. However, although there were social inequities in England as well as in France, England also had a long tradition of peaceful social change. In addition, the country's political leaders were ven successful at uniting all classes of society in the struggle against Revolutionary France and its successor, the Empire under Napoleon Bonaparte.

Despite these successes, fears of revolutionary rhetoric and struggle persisted in England down to Dickens's own day. Other changes also embraced the country: the Industrial Revolution a new wealthy class and brought a previously unknown prosperity to England. That same industrialization, however, also created an underclass of laborers who relied on regular wages to survive. "Overcrowding, disease, hunger, long hours of work, and mindless, repetitive labor," explains Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, "characterized the new life for this new class of urban poor." This underclass was largely scorned or ignored by society. It had no rights, it could not vote in elections, and it could not legally form unions for its own protection. In addition, Glancy states, "many members of the upper classes feared even educating the poor, in case they would then become politically aware and eager to better themselves when it suited many people to have them as cheap labor." The English tradition of peaceful protest, expressed by public marches and meetings, continued throughout the early nineteenth century, but it was interrupted as the century progressed by riots and the destruction of property. "People feared that a revolution as horrifying as the French one could after all happen in England," Glancy declares. "A few political thinkers believed that such a revolution was actually the answer to Britain's problems, but most people, like Dickens, feared the actions of the mob, having seen the bloody outcome of the 1789 revolution."

The revolution that Dickens and many others feared in 1850s England did not arrive, in part because of the efforts of various reform parties. Although groups such as the Chartist movement had struggled for better conditions for English workers as early as the 1830s, by the 1850s many of the reforms they had sought were still not in place. The 1832 Reform Bill, introduced by Lord John Russell, had smoothed out

some of the inequities in the parliamentary system, but it still left thousands of working poor disenfranchised and discontented. It was not until 1867 that Benjamin Disraeli introduced a Reform Bill that nearly doubled the number of voters throughout England, Wales, and Scotland. This reform, passed late in Dickens's life, helped smother the fears of bloody revolution that dogged the English upper and middle classes. "There was no bloody revolution," explains Glancy, "but Dickens and others deplored the snail's pace that the government took to achieve peaceful reform through the parliamentary process. If the time of the Revolution in France was 'the epoch of belief … the epoch of incredulity,'" she concludes, "so too were the 1850s in Britain.

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