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A Study on Novel - A Tale of Two Cities

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Abstract – A Tale of Two Cities is perhaps the least characteristic of Charles Dickens's works. Unlike both his earlier and his later novels, which are largely concerned with events within the Victorian society in which he lived, A Tale of Two Cities is set during a period some seventy years earlier. It shows both France and England in an unflattering light. Perhaps because the novel is so uncharacteristic of the author, it remains among the author's most popular works with readers who do not generally enjoy Dickens. On the other hand, it is often rated the least popular Dickens novel among Dickens fans.

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INTRODUCTION

While *A Tale of Two Cities* was immensely popular with the reading public on its original serialization in 1859, its critical reception was mixed. "One feature that appears from the outset," explains Norman Page in his essay "Dickens and His Critics," "is a polarization of responses, the novel being found either superlatively good or superlatively bad." According to Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, most contemporary critics routinely dismissed the type of popular literature that Dickens wrote as being unworthy of ranking as art. The most famous and the most caustic of the early critics of *A Tale of Two Cities* was Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, who wrote a very harsh review of the book in the December 17, 1859, issue of *Saturday Review*. "After condemning the plot - 'it would perhaps be hard to imagine a clumsier or more disjointed framework for the display of the tawdry wares which form Mr. Dickens's stock in trade' - Stephen dismissed *A Tale of Two Cities* as a purely mechanical effort, producing grotesqueness and pathos through formula writing and trickery," explains Glancy. "He objected particularly to the grotesqueness' of the speech of the French characters, whose French-sounding English he considered 'misbegotten jargon' that 'shows a great want of sensibility to the real requirements of art.'" "It has been suggested," continues Page, "that … Stephen was motivated more by political than by literary considerations, and it is true that one line of his attack is directed at Dickens's disparagement of eighteenth-century England in relation to the present, and his hostile portrayal of the French aristocracy of the same period."

Stephen's attack politically motivated or not, sums up most of the criticisms that later scholars have leveled at the novel: (1) as history, it is flawed; (2) it is mechanical and unrealistic in its construction; and (3) it is very uncharacteristic of Dickens. Many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics, including the important Dickens scholar George Gissing and Dickens's fellow-journalist and novelist G. K. Chesterton, followed Stephen's lead in criticizing the novel. According to Page's essay, Chesterton objects to Dickens's portrayal of the Revolution as an elemental act of emotion rather than recognizing the importance of intellectual ideas. Page also reveals that in Gissing's review of the novel, construction has "ceased to be a virtue and has become a constraining and excluding factor." After Dickens's death in 1871, writes Page, "the novelist Margaret Oliphant dismissed it as unworthy of Dickens and suggested that it 'might have been written by any new author, so little of Dickens there is in it.'" Other critics considered its characters and its staging unrealistic and objected to its lack of humor.

Stephen's opinion, although influential, was not universally accepted. Favorable reviews of *A Tale of Two Cities* appeared in London newspapers, including the *Daily News*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Star*, throughout the month of December, 1859. Many of Dickens's own literary friends, acquaintances, and contemporaries, including John Forster, Thomas Carlyle, Wilkie Collins, and Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) also praised the novel. Modern critics also largely praise the novel, concentrating on its psychological portraits and its status as historical fiction. Glancy reports that the work "has achieved new status and new serious study," and concludes that "its continuing presence on school reading lists and in films and plays … attests to its lasting popularity … with the many readers who find in *A Tale of Two Cities* the full range of Dickens's dramatic and narrative power."

In a preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens described how the idea for the novel came to him when he was playing a role in 1857 in a theatrical production of *The Frozen Deep*, a play written by his friend Wilkie Collins. In the play a man involved in a love triangle sacrifices his life to save the rival suitor of the woman he loves. Dickens's account of the origins of the novel points to Sydney Carton as the

central character of *A Tale of Two Cities*, although other evidence suggests that other ideas might have played as large a role in the birth of the book. In notebooks as early as 1855 there appear references to the fate of people released after long imprisonment and to the phrase "Buried Alive," which was for a time Dickens's working title for *A Tale of Two Cities*. "Recalled to Life" became his title for Part I of the novel. This evidence places Dr. Manette's imprisonment center stage. An argument for either character as focal misses Dickens's craft in bringing those two characters and others together in the theme of resurrection and renewal, life, death and rebirth in this story of the French Revolution.

The secrecy shadowing the opening chapter, best expressed in the cryptic message "Recalled to Life," attends the effort to retrieve Dr. Manette from the French prison where he has been "buried" for eighteen years. Three times Dickens repeats the following exchange: "Buried how long?" "Almost eighteen years." "I hope you care to live." "I can't say."

Dr. Manette, a man figuratively returned from the grave and given life again, is the first of many characters in the novel whose life story is the story of death and rebirth. Charles Darnay, on trial for his life at the book's opening, is acquitted; then in France not once but twice, he is retried, each time to be rescued from a near certain death by guillotine. He is rescued first by Carton, then by Dr. Manette, then again by Carton, who speaks the words of the Anglican funeral service, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Carton himself is figuratively brought to life by his heroic role in the novel. In his first appearance, at Darnay's trial, Carton is the Jackal to Stryver's Lion, a man whose promise has ended in a dissolute alcoholism and idleness. When he describes himself to Lucie as a "self-flung away, wasted, drunken, poor creature of misuse," she asks: "Can I not recall you … to a better course?" Indeed she does. In his self-sacrificing devotion to Lucie he finds redemption, giving his life that Darnay might live, the savior saved.

Dickens extends the "Recalled to Life" theme to the secondary characters, sometimes in comic ways. Jerry Cruncher, for example, is a "Resurrection Man," the term given to those who robbed the graves of the freshly buried to keep the anatomy schools supplied with corpses. Cruncher's efforts to retrieve the body of Roger Cly following his burial are stymied when he discovers an empty casket. Cly's death and burial as an Old Bailey spy, complete with an enraged London mob, is a fraud, a means of his escaping England with John Barsad. cly, too, then, is "buried" and resurrected. The aristocrat Foulon tries the same trick in Paris, but the enraged French mob will not be fooled. "Resurrected" from a staged death, he is then killed, his mouth stuffed with grass in fitting vengeance for his once having told the hungry peasantry to eat grass.

The larger canvas on which Dickens works is the story of the two cities of the title, the historical account of the French Revolution which Dickens also thinks in terms of death and renewal, for the Revolution is the death of the *ancien regime* and the birth of the Republic, the bloody and fiery renewal of France. In the same preface in which he spoke of the genesis of the novel in his participation in Collins's play, Dickens also expressed his gratitude to Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, whose The French Revolution (1837) Dickens once claimed in a letter to have read "for the 500th time." From Carlyle, Dickens took both numerous specific details about the Revolution and a more general view of history. Carlyle viewed history as a grand succession of eras, often in cycles of destruction and reconstitution. In history there was always a revelation of a divine moral order at work in the world. The French Revolution, the single most significant recent event in the lives of those like Carlyle and Dickens who were born in the Napoleonic aftermath, offered abundant lessons regarding the presence of the past. Horrified by the Terror of 1793, the English read the lesson that corruption breeds corruption, that extremes are followed by extremes. The earlier generation of English writers, typified by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth were stirred by the ambitious idealism of the Revolution. To Dickens, by contrast, although he evoked sentimental ideals in Carton's sacrifice to save the life of a rival lover, there was nothing romantic or idealizing about what death was necessary to recall to life a nation.

The avenging revolutionaries are as dreadful as those whom they overthrow. Dickens allots a single chapter to recounting the rape of the young peasant girl, Madame Defarge's sister, at Darnay's second trial when Defarge reads from the account of the affair which Dr. Manette had written in 1857. Only three chapters sketch the proud indifference to the suffering of the peasantry of Monseigneur St. Evremonde, Damay's uncle, leading to his murder. The remaining French chapters unroll in all their gruesome predictability the equally barbarous French mobs of the Revolution. In other words, Dickens is more horrified by the sins of the Revolutionaries than by the sins of the aristocrats which give birth to revolution. Except for the Defarges, who are given names and more singular identities, the Revolutionaries are seen collectively, all of them named "Jacques." St. Antoine, a place name for a Paris suburb, is personified, given a collective identity. In the Carmagnole, the frenzied dance in the Paris streets which follows Darnay's acquittal in his first French trial, all identities merge into one destructive force. Finally, characters have identities not as persons but as awful functions in the Revolution, as in the case of Vengeance, who accompanies the Defarges.

With death and life so closely linked in the renewal theme, Dickens found a strategy for his presentation. He presents, beginning with the title, complementary and contradictory pairs of places, characters, events, and ideas. London and Paris, the former apparently a safe haven, the latter a hell, are more similar than they

seem. Darnay is tried in both cities. The mob at Cly's "burial" is as frenzied as the ones in Paris. At the Manettes' apartment in Soho, a thunderstorm disrupts an outdoor Sunday dinner, driving the Manettes inside for safety while people hurry in the streets, their footsteps "the footsteps destined to come to all of us."

Characters are doubles of each other. Carton resembles Darnay, in the beginning physically but not morally, in the end reversed. Darnay himself, having renounced his birthright, is a ghost of the Evremondes. Darnay's father and uncle are twins, indistinguishable in their awful pride. Dr. Manette has two selves, the imprisoned man who flees the horror of his imprisonment by reducing his life to work on a shoe bench, and the rescued man who several times regresses to his former self.

Even Dickens's style reflects his obsession with duality. The famous opening passage almost traps Dickens, like a repeated melody which he cannot stop: 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, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, 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.

The key note struck is contradiction, but the passage also points to the similarity between the age of the French Revolution and Dickens's own. His story insists that all ages are one in the call of duty and the threat to civility and virtue. His most virtuous characters in the book - Lucie, Darnay, Carton, Manette, Lorry- are self-sacrificing, but, unlike the Revolutionaries, who insist on self-sacrifice for the sake of Revolution, Dickens's virtuous ones give of themselves for another individual. For Dickens the grand sweep of historical events is still dwarfed by the power of personal relationships in which life, death, and renewal are less ambiguous, as the Revolution disappears before Carton's final words: "It is a far, far better thing I do than any I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than any I have ever known." Dickens's apparent solution to the problem of a world so troubled that it spawns vengeful revolution is a call to a moral renewal in our personal relationships which would make such revolutions unnecessary.

Lucie is basically only one more in the line of Dickensian virgin-heroines whom the critic Edwin Pugh [in *The Charles Dickens Originals*, 1925] felicitously called "feminanities." Yet, as Professor Edgar Johnson clearly saw [in his book *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, Vol. II, 1952], there was a subtle distinction.

Lucie … is given hardly any individual traits at all, although her appearance, as Dickens describes it, is like that of Ellen, "a short, slight, pretty figure, a quantity of golden hair, a pair of blue eyes," and it may be that her one unique physical characteristic was drawn from Ellen too: "a forehead with a singular capacity (remembering how young and smooth it was), of lifting and knitting itself into an expression that was not quite one of perplexity, or wonder, or alarm, though it included all the four expressions." … The fact that Lucie and Dr. Manette at the time of his release from the Bastille are of almost the same age as Ellen and Dickens does not mean that the Doctor's feeling for his daughter is the emotion Dickens felt for the pretty, blue-eyed actress, although the two merge perhaps in his fervent declaration that he knows Ellen to be as "innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughter."

But Lucie fails to fit into the pattern of the unattainable dream-virgin of the earlier novels in at least one other respect. Most of Dickens' earlier heroine-ideals do not marry until the last-chapter summation of the "lived-happily-ever-after" pattern. Lucie is married, happily married, through much of the book. She maintains a household for her husband and her father, and she finds room for compassion, if not love, for the erring Carton. What is more, she has children, two of them. Yet she seems never to grow older. She was seventeen in 1775; she is, to all intents and purposes, seventeen in 1792. In the interim she has allegedly given birth to two Dickens-ideal infants, two of the most sickening little poppets we could possibly expect from one who, despite his experience as the father of ten children, still sought desperately to re-create infancy and childhood in an image which would affirm his own concept of unworldly innocence. Let the reader take a firm grip on himself and read the dying words of the little son of Charles and Lucie Darnay, who died in early childhood for no other reason, it must seem, than to give the author another opportunity to wallow in bathos.

A broad ray of light fell into the garret, and showed the workman, with an unfinished shoe upon his lap, pausing in his labour. His few common tools and various scraps of leather were at his feet and on his bench. He had a white beard, raggedly cut, but not very long, a hollow face, and exceedingly bright eyes. The hollowness and thinness of his face would have caused them to look large, under his yet dark eyebrows and his confused white hair, though they had been really otherwise, but they were naturally large, and looked unnaturally so. His yellow rags of shirt lay open at the throat, and showed his body to be withered and worn.

Of course the appearance of great age in a middle-age man is rationally explained by the suffering entailed by his long, unjust imprisonment. Yet, nearly eighteen years later (the repetition of the number is meaningful), when he has become the unwitting agent of his son-in-law's destruction and has been unable to use his special influence to procure Charles' release, he is pictured as a decayed mass of senility.

When we consider Dr. Manette's conduct, however, we find that, whether Dickens consciously intended it to be or not, the doctor of Beauvais is a good psychiatrist, at least in the handling of his own illness. His shoemaking is superficially pictured as a symptom of mental regression and decay, but in its inception it must have been a sign of rebellion against madness rather than a symptom thereof. He relates that he begged for permission to make shoes as a means of diverting his mind from its unendurable suffering. Shoemaking, truly an example of vocational therapy, was the only contact with reality that his distracted mind, otherwise cut off from reality, possessed. It was, therefore, a means of bringing about his recovery. Lucie fears the shoemaking, but she realizes that her loving presence, coupled with the availability, if needed, of the vocational contact with reality, will serve to draw him back to normal adjustment. It would seem, then, that the act of Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross, carried on furtively and guiltily, of destroying his shoemaker's bench and tools after his spontaneous recovery from the attack following Lucie' s wedding, was a great error, an error against which the doctor, giving an opinion in the anonymous presentation of his own case by Mr. Lorry, strongly advises. For when he once again falls into a state of amnesia and confusion, after the realization of the damage he has done to Charles and his impotence to remedy that damage, he calls for his bench and tools, but they are no longer to be had, and he huddles in a corner of the coach leaving Paris, a pitiful picture of mental decay from which we can see no hope of recovery despite the optimistic vision of Carton's last moments.

The basic aim of this paper has been, of course, psychological interpretation; but the psychological critic has sometimes been accused of neglecting the critical function of evaluation, and possibly a few concluding words might be added on that score.

In a lecture on criticism given at Harvard in 1947, E . M Forster [as recorded by V. S. Pritchett in an article on E. M. Forster, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, December 29, 1968] distinguished beautifully between the function and method of creation and the function and method of criticism.

What about the creative state? In it a man is taken out of himself. He lets down, as it were, a bucket into the unconscious and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach. He mixes this thing with his normal experience and out of the mixture he makes a work of art.… After this glance at the creative state, let us look at the critical. The critical state has many merits, and employs some of the highest and subtlest faculties of man. But it is grotesquely remote from the state responsible for the works it affects to expound. It does not let buckets down into the unconscious. It does not conceive in sleep or know what it has said after it has said it. Think before you speak, is criticism's motto; speak before you think is creation's. Nor is criticism disconcerted by people arriving from Porlock; in fact it sometimes comes from Porlock itself.

What Mr. Forster has set forth can best be understood in the light of the road which has been taken by psychological, particularly psychoanalytic, criticism in the more than twenty years which have elapsed since the delivery of that lecture in 1947. The psychoanalytic critic of today would like to think that he comes from Xanadu rather than Porlock. He cannot claim that he consistently writes before he thinks, but his thinking is to some extent based on material which the bucket lowered into the depths has brought up for him.

Saying a literary work is "good," then, from the point of view of our model, is predicting that it will pass the test of time; that it "can please many and please long"; that it is a widely satisfying form of play; or, more formally, that it embodies a fantasy with a power to disturb many readers over a long period of time and, built in, a defensive maneuver that will enable those readers to master the poem's disturbance.

A Tale of Two Cities does, it seems to me, give every indication, even apart from its past history, that it "can please many and please long." Its use of the dynamic scapegoat pattern with the employment of the pattern of multiple projection, which it has been my aim to point out in this essay, does indeed embody a fantasy, a fantasy which was disturbing to Dickens and is still undoubtedly disturbing to many readers, and has used that device of multiple projection as the defensive maneuver that enables readers to master that disturbance. In that sense, there seems to be little doubt about the continuance of the perennial popularity of this often maligned but still frequently read novel of Dickens' later period.

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