

*Book Review*

## Background of French revolution in Dickens's 'A Tale of Two Cities

Saravanan Sarpparaje

6, Bajanaï Madam Street, Virudhunagar Tamilnadu, India.

Received 5 March, 2013; Accepted 4 June, 2014

Charles Dickens (1812 to 1870) is a foremost representative novelist of the Victorian era, a great storyteller and social reformer. *A Tale of Two Cities* has always been one of his most popular and best-loved novels. It is the second attempt on historical fiction by Dickens and French Revolution is his subject. Always interested in the interaction between individuals and society, Dickens was particularly inspired by Thomas Carlyle's history, *The French Revolution*. He saw similarities between the forces that led to the Revolution and the oppression and unrest occurring in England in his own time. Although he supported the idea of people rising up against tyranny, the violence that characterized the French Revolution troubled him. In the preface to his novel he says "to add something to the popular and picturesque means understanding that terrible time". The story is set in London, Paris and the French countryside at the time of French Revolution. The book is sympathetic to the overthrow of the French aristocracy but highly critical of the reign of terror that followed. The whole book is dominated by the guillotine-tumbrels thundering to and fro and the bloody knives. Actually, these scenes occupy only a few chapters, but they are written with terrible intensity, and the rest of the book is rather slow going. That is why everyone remembers the revolutionary scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Again and again, he insists upon the meaningless horrors of revolution, the injustice, the ever-present terror of spies, and the frightful blood lust of the mob. The descriptions of the Paris mob, for instance, the crowd of murderers struggling round the grindstone to sharpen their weapons before butchering the prisoners in the September massacres outdo anything. These are the events in the history of France which form the flaming background of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Its interpretation of the French Revolution has strongly shaped the British views of national identity and political legitimacy. At the same time, it offers a powerful melodramatic plot pitting private individuals against political systems.

**Key words:** Charles Dickens english novel, french revolution and Shakespeare,

### INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens, is a unique writer in the modern English novel a great genius achieving great popular success. He is the Shakespeare of English fiction (Fielding, 1986). In Victorian England, Dickens used his novels as a pulpit for condemning the evils of the society. The first historical novel of Dickens was *Barnaby Rudge* in which he

narrated the story of the Gordon Riots. *A Tale of Two Cities* is the second attempt at historical fiction by him and French Revolution is his subject. It has always been one of Dickens's most popular and best-loved novels (Price, 1967). Its interpretation of the French Revolution has strongly shaped British views of national identity

E-mail: [asm.sarppa@gmail.com](mailto:asm.sarppa@gmail.com).

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

and political legitimacy. At the same time, it offers a powerful melodramatic plot pitting private individuals against political systems. In the preface to the novel, Dickens says "It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time" (xiii). The novel's enduring appeal, trace the origins of its account to the French revolution, which offers new readings of it as a sophisticated fiction in its own right, which also explores its reinvention for stage and cinema over the century and a half since its publication. Contributions from literary studies, political history, the history of ideas and the history of film make this volume a multi-faceted reevaluation of a significant work in English politics and culture.

### **The French revolution and the legacy of 'A Tale of Two Cities'**

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the French Revolution is a prime mover of plot. The novel begins with this, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times", this is set against the backdrop of the French Revolution. The French Revolution was one of the most important events of the 1700s, and its influence was still strong in Charles Dickens's time. The revolution began in 1789 with the attack on the notorious prison, the Bastille—a key event in *A Tale of Two Cities*. For the historical background of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens relied on a massive history of The French Revolution written by his friend Thomas Carlyle. Many incidents in the novel are based on real life occurrences described by Carlyle. Dickens was also influenced by Carlyle's belief that the revolution was inspired by the centuries of cruelty and poverty the French poor had to endure at the hands of the corrupt nobility.

Much of the action of *A Tale of Two Cities*, takes place in Paris during the French Revolution and shows how the tyranny of the French aristocracy—high taxes, unjust laws, and a complete disregard for the well-being of the poor—fed a rage among the commoners that eventually erupted in revolution. Dickens depicts this process most clearly through his portrayal of some of the events of French Revolution, such as the storming of the Bastille, the senseless fury of the mob and the Reign of Terror. The guillotine, a machine designed to behead its victims, is one of the enduring symbols of the French Revolution. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the guillotine symbolizes how revolutionary chaos gets institutionalized. With the guillotine, killing becomes emotionless and automatic, and human life becomes cheap. The guillotine, as a symbol, expresses exactly what Dickens meant by adding the two final words ("or Death") to the end of the French national motto: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death." The Bastille and Guillotine are the only historical facts in the novel but as a skilled novelist Dickens reveals

how these facts or incidents influenced the individuals who were not related to the revolutions, as we observe in the case of Doctor Manette, whose family was completely shattered due to it.

### **Background of French revolution in 'A Tale of Two Cities'**

*A Tale of Two Cities* consists of a number of episodes and characters that are connected by Dickens with historical side of the French Revolution. In the very first chapter entitled "Recalled to Life", he points out that the political condition of London is similar to that of Paris. The lives and properties of Londoners are insecure. The condition of France is no less rotten. If any Frenchman fails to pay respects to the oppressive people, he is liable to be tortured and the same incredible oppressive atmosphere prevailed in France also.

The second part of the book is devoted to an analysis of social conditions in pre-revolutionary France. Monseigneur, a powerful lord at the court, typified the tyranny and callousness of the aristocrats. Four cooks were employed by him to prepare chocolate for him. Instead of devoting himself to the promotion of public welfare, he spends his time in theatres in the company of fascinating ladies. Government officials are inefficient. Military officers are without military knowledge and civil officers are equally ignorant of civil affairs. Doctors are engaged in curing the imaginary diseases of fashionable ladies and philosophers are busy building castles in the air. Aristocratic ladies think it a disgrace to beget children. In short, it is a top heavy society with its upper classes grinding out of the lower classes.

The tragic past of Dr. Manette reveals the character of Evermonde brothers who has spoiled an innocent working world. Dr. Manette is put in the Bastille prison for eighteen years because he earns the displeasure of a noble man. Aristocrats can send anybody to jail at that time. The poor people suffered a lot, for instance, they drink the wine that is accidentally spilt on the street. Marquis, the uncle of Darnay is another representative of the heartless Aristocracy. His coach rushes a child to death. He throws a gold coin to the father of the dead child. He is worried about his horses than the child. Darnay is benevolent and wants his uncle to stop exploiting the poor. But Marquis turns a deaf ear. He thinks only of the good old days when the aristocrats could ill-treat the poor with impunity.

*"Our remote ancestors held the right of Life and death over the surrounding vulgar..."*

Men like Marquis who refuses to change with the changing times saw the wind; the whirlwind they reap is the revolution with all its attendant horrors. The feelings of the people in France reach the boiling point and they

stormed Bastille.

A Tale of Two Cities creates the impression that, before the revolution French common people suffered from such savage oppression that eventually they rose against their masters in a frenzy of bloodlust and revenge. The aim of the revolution is not merely to chop off the heads of the aristocrats but to improve the economic conditions of the poor. But this has not been achieved by the revolution. Poverty continues to grind out the poor. The worst face of the revolution is reached when its own supporters start suspecting and accusing one another. Madam Defarge is a fierce, vindictive and impassive woman. She can inflict vengeance on her enemies and the upper classes. She knits the names of her intended victims and exemplifies the driving force behind the revolution. She heads the women of St. Antonie and leads them to attack the Bastille. She does not have the soft feelings and tender sentiments that are usually associated with the fairer sex. Throughout her life, she has been exposed to the sufferings of the poor at the hands of the nobles. Hence, she generalizes that all aristocrats are wicked and deserve to be put to death. There are glorious exceptions like Charles Darnay who relinquishes his property of his own accord in favour of the poor. But, to Madam Defarge, such stray exceptions do not invalidate the general rule.

Her implacable hatred of the aristocrats is seen when she demands the death of Dr. Manette, Lucie and her little girl. Lucie, as a wife and mother, appeals to Madame Defarge and requests her not to do any harm for her husband. Madame Defarge talks only of the hundreds of poor wives and mothers whose husbands endured untold sufferings at the hands of nobles.

*"We have seen our sister women suffer  
Nakedness, hunger, thirst, sickness, misery,  
Oppression and neglect of all kinds... (596)"*

The revolution does not do much good also because most of its supporters are like Barsard, political chameleons. They attach themselves to save their skins. Men like the Juryman and the mender of the road have joined the movement because it satisfies their craving for some sensation or other. With such shallow witted people supporting it, the revolution is bound to go awry.

### Dickens and the French revolution

Dickens is non-committed in his attitude towards the revolution. He condemns the evil aristocracies. At the same time, he condemns the evil revolutionists also who have no less blood thirsty than the aristocrats of old. He hates oppression wherever it is found. When the rich are oppressed by the poor in spite of their innocence, he pities the rich. When the poor are oppressed by the rich he pities the poor. As Chesterton says, "Dickens did sympathize with every sort of victim of every sort of

tyrant. He did truly pray for all who are desolate and oppressed". To Dickens, evil and tyranny can beget only evil and tyranny. The only way to avoid the revolution and all its blood bath is to practice Christian charity, as Darnay and Sydney Carton do. Darnay voluntarily relinquishes his property in favour of the poor and does not mind his own life in order to save the poor citizen, Gabelle. Sydney Carton gladly lays down his life for the sake of his love. Jarvis Lorry and Jerry Cruncher are loyal to the core and are bent on protecting the interests of their customers. Without minding the grave dangers, Lorry and Cruncher go to Paris when the revolution is at its height, just to save their belongings of their French customers. Miss Pross, the servant maid of Lucie, does not betray Lucie. When Pross is threatened by Madam Defarge with imminent death, Pross violently wrestles with the tigrish woman and does not think of divulging the secret of Lucie's departure in order to save her own skin. Those people- Carton, Darnay, Dr. Manette, Lorry, Cruncher and Miss Pross with their capacity for voluntary abdication and self-sacrifice are far nobler than the aristocrats of the old order and the revolutionists of the new order. The only revolution that Dickens recommends is the Christian revolution of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation and not the French revolution of plundering and pillaging.

### CONCLUSION

Dickens is the master of the sunniest smiles and most unselfish tears. Even today, he charms all readers of English. Madame Defarge, knitting the condemnation of aristocrats in the wine shop is not only a colourful fiction figure but she is the figure of history. The experience of Dr. Manette before his imprisonment were not incredible in those times nor the murder of the child and the contemptuous air of the Marquis of Evermonde. These are the events in the history of France which form the flaming background of Dickens's novel A Tale of Two Cities. Dickens gives the readers a complete picture of the French revolution with all its horror and human activities.

### REFERENCES

- Fielding KJ (1986). Studying Charles Dickens" published by Longman York Press.  
Price M (1967). "Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays" Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall.  
[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/taleoftwocities/taleoftwocities\\_teachersguide.pdf](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/taleoftwocities/taleoftwocities_teachersguide.pdf)

### CITATION

- <http://www.gradesaver.com/tale-of-two-cities/study-guide/section10/>  
<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-tale-of-two-cities/themes>.