

The Historical Value of Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities

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Abstract

In "historical" fiction, characters that never really existed, give expression to the impact of historical events on the people who really did live through them. The result is not history, as an accurate record of actual events, but fiction in which an earlier age is rendered through the personal joys and sufferings of characters. This paper aims at investigating the historical realities presented in Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities.

Dickens believes that the function of a novelist is not the simple portrayal of history but the recreation of it, yet in the preface to "A Tale of Two Cities", he mentions a Mr. Carlyle referring to the Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle. It is said that Dickens requested some reference material from the historian who out of good humor sent him a cartload. Dickens took the matter seriously and it is reported that he read it all.¹

It is commonplace of Dickens's criticism that Carlyle's "The French Revolution" influenced the writer. Many critics have discussed Carlyle's influence on several aspects of the novel, such as the narrative technique, the imagery associated with

the Revolution, and the narration of the historical episodes. And yet, Dickens's outlook on revolutionary violence differed significantly from that of Carlyle. As Irene Collins points out, "Dickens dislikes the violence of the revolutionaries, both in its popular form (the mob) and in its institutionalized form (the Terror). Unlike Carlyle, he can no longer see justice in [the] violence"². Moreover, it is Dickens's novel, rather than Carlyle's history, which is responsible for the popular image of the French Revolution.

In the 1850s, Charles Dickens was concerned that the social problems in England might provoke a mass reaction. In a letter written in 1855, for example, he refers to the unrest of the time as follows:

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I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smoldering, 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.

(Quoted in I. Collins 42).

At the beginning of "A Tale of Two Cities" (1859), Dickens once again expresses his concern. The novel opens in 1775, with a comparison of England and pre-revolutionary 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" (Bk. 1, Ch. 1). The rest of the chapter shows that Dickens regarded the condition to be an 'evil' one, since he depicts both countries as rife with poverty, injustice, and violence due to the irresponsibility of the ruling elite (1-3; Bk. 1, Ch. 1). As the novel unfolds, however, England becomes a safe haven for those escaping the violence perpetrated by the French Revolution. In this paper, the historical facts of A Tale of Two Cities shall be reviewed in an attempt to prove that

Dickens reflects revolution in general and not the history of the French Revolution as many people believe.

The novel as a whole is only concerned with particular events of real history. In the opening chapter of Book I, Dickens allots equal space to the problems of both England and France in 1775 and implies that the two cities will be equally treated in the narrative. In Book II, he satirizes English justice, lawyers and courts of law and divides the time almost equally between the two countries.

As Woodcock points out, the title suggests not only the balancing of two capitals, two societies, and two peoples: "It suggests the basic dichotomy on which the novel rests."³

Dickens presents a realistic atmosphere and setting and as the novel is literally a tale about two cities and the inhabitants of both, he shows the reader the temper of the English mob as well as that of the French. In

short, he portrays the people and attitudes of two cities separated by a narrow channel.

Literary Realisation of Historic Facts

To assess the historical reality of the novel a quick historical review is needed together with the major causes leading to the bloody events, so as to hold a comparison with the relevant chapters in the novel.

In 1774, Louis xvi inherited the throne together with all the woes of the nation that have accumulated along the years as a result to the mistakes or misjudgment of previous rulers. As a timid and honest ruler, Louis xvi wanted to end all kinds of abuses, but had no real interest in politics. He had only two interests; hunting and playing at his hobby of locksmithing (this could be compared with Dr. Manette's finding solace in shoemaking)

At the age of sixteen, the king married Marie Antoinette. Influenced by her mother, the Empress of Austria, she tried to advance the interest of her homeland at the French court, thus providing her enemies with the opportunity of discrediting her and turning her good qualities to a disadvantage.

In 1788, the country as a whole seemed well off. The people were satisfied with monarchy but wanted medieval economy replaced. They wanted power transferred to the cultured and educated middle class.⁴ Had the king done that; he would have probably saved France from revolution.

The opening chapter begins with the year 1775 and the bad conditions in both England and France. France under Louis xvi is bankrupt on both economic and religious levels. Above all the French treat each other inhumanely. Fate and Death forewarn the coming revolution.

The famous lines at the opening of the novel provide an overview of the whole era with all its contradictions "wisdom" and "foolishness", "light" and "darkness", "hope" and "despair".

The "King with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face on the throne of England" are George III and Charlotte Sophia (1760-1820). The "King with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face on the throne of France" are Louis xvi and Marie Antoinette (1774-1793).

Dickens refers to the conditions in both countries showing the economic inflation, the political and religious corruption, foreshadowing the

Revolution in France, while, England is shown to be no better with robbery and murder as everyday occurrences and law being a mere mockery of justice.

In reality, the French people had no understanding of a constitutional government and wanted a republic without really knowing what a republic was. So the French Revolution once launched became a series of frenzied riots with intervals of calm. This fact is largely reflected in chapters “Echoing Footsteps”, “The Sea Still Rises”, and “Fire Rises”.

In “Echoing Footsteps”, Dickens presents Paris at the very moment in which the peasants are arming themselves with every kind of weapon imaginable and marching with a roar that overflows all of France towards the Bastille. Hour upon hour they storm the massive stonewall and great towers. Finally the Bastille surrenders.

A great deal of description of the storming of the Bastille is borrowed directly from Carlyle. For example, Dickens’s passage reads, “...the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack begun...” while Carlyle’s passage reads

“...behold...how the multitude flows on, welling through every street; tocsin furiously pealing, all drums beating...”

The role of women during the siege also comes from Carlyle, who had devoted eleven chapters of his history to “The insurrection of the women”, and one of his female leaders was Demoiselle Theroigne, later in Carlyle’s account, Demoiselle Theroigne cries “Vengeance Victoire ou la morte!”, Dickens named Madam Defarge’s chief lieutenant, The Vengeance, as is shown in chapter xxii.

The following chapter “The Sea Still Rises” begins one week after the storming of the Bastille. Dickens shows how atrocity piles up on top of atrocity.

In the lynching of Foulon, a government official and enemy of the people who had once told the peasants to eat grass if they did not have food,⁵(Bk. II, xxii). The peasants on the Hotel de Ville seize Foulon and drag him mercilessly through the streets, hoist him up on the ropes then they put his head on a pike and stuff his mouth with grass. Later in the day, another enemy of the people Foulon’s son-in-law is also seized and his head also put on pikes.

In “Fire Rises” changes are taking place in many villages throughout

France. In the village of the dead Marquis, villagers meet at night. Monsieur Gabelle's, the chief functionary, house is surrounded but he manages to escape. He is luckier than other functionaries in other villages who are hoisted up on ropes and pulleys. In this chapter Dickens shows how terror continued. The firing of the Chateaux owned by aristocrats was a familiar sight at that time.

In reality, in May 1789, after the States General (under edict of the king), met at Versailles, over 900 deputies convened. In June, 500 deputies chosen to represent the Third Estate, joined by members of the lower clergy and many of the nobles proclaimed themselves the National Assembly. They voted that taxation without consent was illegal which meant the usurpation of king's power thus paving way for the Revolution. The king had to decide whether to support the people or the privileged class. The king chose to support the nobles and asked his foreign troops to come to Paris and Versailles to support him. Rumors spread through Paris that quantities of gunpowder had been transferred to the Bastille and people marched towards the symbol of oppression and feudalism, killed the governor and guards then rioted the

streets. This demonstration was the first of a number of demonstrations, each of which left its imprint on the nation. In provinces fear drove the people to chaos and anarchy. Chateaux, tax offices and jails were set on fire in local uprising.⁶

In 1792 war was declared against Austria. The king had hoped to save the monarchy through war but things got out of hand in July when Prussia joined Austria. The enemy issued a manifest threatening the destruction of France if the royal family were not shown respect. The Parisian mob decided to get rid of the king and they attacked the Tuileries, and a revolutionary tribunal was set up. This is shown in Dickens's "Triumph". This chapter shows Darnay as one of twenty prisoners to be tried. Many of those prisoners are of aristocratic heritage and breeding. Fifteen out of the twenty are sentenced to death. This chapter marks the beginning of the Reign of Terror.

The chapters "Grindstone" and "Triumph" shed light on the September Massacre. In them, Dickens captures the fury and violence of the French Revolution. "Grindstone" is described as one of the most horrifying scenes in the novel. The novelist shows how chaos brings out man's beastly

qualities. He describes a crowd of men and women, smeared with blood, holding pieces of linen and lace (torn from the clothing of aristocrats) and sharpening their red-stained and dripping weapons at the grindstone. "They are murdering the prisoners", the readers are informed when Mr. Lorry whispers to Dr. Manette.

In "Calm in Storm", Dickens's description of anarchy raging throughout France and his satiric treatment of la "Guillotine" and the "Samson," who works it, take on a savagery seldom equaled in literature.

In "Triumph" the writer also prepares the reader for the awful turn of events about to come and draws attention to a fact about the mob. The same mob that celebrates Charles's release today, can chop off his head tomorrow.

In reality one by one the revolutionary leaders met death. Danton and Madame Roland were guillotined, and Marat was stabbed to death in his bathtub.

One tyranny yielded to another and by 1793 The Reign of Terror was in full swing. It continued for fourteen months and came to an end in July 1794 when the last of the Revolutionary tyrants, Robespierre, was overthrown. Thousands of people

were killed on mere suspicion, and finally the guillotiners themselves were guillotined.

In chapters "Wood Sawyer", "The Game Made", "Fifty Two", "The Knitting Done" and "The Footsteps Die out Forever", Dickens records how the revolutionists continued to daily feed the guillotine with victims from every social stratum in France, thus immortalizing the ferocious dance of the revolutionists- the Carmagnole.

In the "Game Made" some facts are recorded such as the flourishing trade of body snatching and the state of lawlessness where a man, Charles Evremonde is tried twice within two days. In "Fifty Two" Dickens presents the pursued members of the aristocracy or any other non-revolutionary members of some class escaping from France. He also warns, in this chapter, English men that if the abuse of masses is continued and if governmental laws and social reforms are not immediately instituted, Britain too can suffer a revolution as horrifying as the French.

In "Knitting Done" and "The Footsteps Die out Forever" readers are shown how chief revolutionary agents were disposed of – The Vengeance searches vainly for Mme. Defarge to take her empty seat by the guillotine.

In the last chapter, Dickens issues a warning to all oppressors of humanity: "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself in to the same tortured forms."

From the previous comparison between actual events and the incidents described in the novel, readers may conclude that Dickens had made a vivid recreation of the disordered times of the French Revolution in a skillful style. It is clear that he was fascinated by the problems of France. In Book III, Dickens focuses entirely on The Reign of Terror, which is a historically significant period because of its influence on the modern era.

Dickens's most important scenes as regards his reference to reality are as follows:

- The taking of the Bastille in Book II, xxi.
- The lynching of Foulon in Book II, xxii.
- The burning of Chateaux in Book II, xxiii.
- The Barriers, the Revolutionary Army, the prisoners in Book III, i.
- The Grindstone in Book III, ii.
- The Guillotine in Book III, iv and xv.
- The Carmagnole III, v.

- The Tribunal Book III, vi and ix.

Other details such as the execution with torture of Damiens (Bk. II, xv) and the feudal privileges of the nobles in (Bk. III, x) are also mentioned. Nevertheless, the novelist introduces no historical figures and no major realistic events save for a distant view of the French court, the lynching of Foulon and the burning of the Chateaux. The political forces of the Revolution remain unseen while the bloodthirsty mob counting heads are portrayed. This lack of reference to the actual course of events adds very little to the knowledge of the average reader. There is no suggestion at all that the Revolution had any intellectual or idealistic content.

Though Dickens seems to have seen clearly that the French Revolution was bound to happen, he fails to see revolutionaries as people fighting for a cause. To him they are mere savages spreading horror all over the country, whereas apologists of any revolution try to minimize its horrors.

The rapid succession of dramatic scenes presenting every horrifying aspect of the years 1789-92 provide a lurid background to the actions and speech of all the main characters.

Despite the novelist's lack of a broad philosophical outlook for this

kind of fiction, he manages to fix the French Revolution firmly in the minds of his readers. While sympathetic to the cause of the overtaxed, starving peasants, he is antagonistic to the extremist frenzy of the new republic.

His exaggeration seems to point out that his A Tale of Two Cities is about revolution in general, and not just the French Revolution reflecting faith in social regeneration. Even in the darkest scenes there is a suggestion for a brighter future. A Tale of Two Cities may be described as a bold experiment that depended on what he reached out for rather than what he achieved.

Notes

- ¹ Coles Notes, A Tale of Two Cities, (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company 1982), p.7.
- ² Irene Collins, Irene. "Charles Dickens and the French Revolution." *Literature and History* 1.1 (1990): p.46
- ³ Friedman, Barton R. "Antihistory: Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities." *Dickens's Later Work: Assessments since 1870*. Ed. Michael Hollington. East Sussex: Helm, 1995. pp 481-5.
- ⁴ Leonre Mossoff, Charles Dickens A Tale of Two Cities, (New York: Barrons and Noble Inc. 1968), p. 16
- ⁵ Coles Notes, p. 9
- ⁶ Ramji Lall, Charles Dickens A Tale of Two Cities, (New Delhi: Arti Book Centre 1985), p. 137

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القيمة التاريخية لرواية "قصة مدينتين" للروائي تشارلز ديكنز

المدرس مي وتوت

كلية التربية للبنات – قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المخلص

في الروايات التاريخية تعكس الشخصيات الخيالية تأثير الاحداث الواقعية على الاشخاص الذين عاشوا تلك الحقبه من التاريخ. وهكذا لا يمكن اعتبار العمل سجلاً تاريخياً صرفاً وإنما ادباً قصصياً يصور احداث خقبه سابقه تنسجها افراح وهموم ابطال الرواية.

يهدف هذا البحث لتقصي الحقائق التاريخية المسجلة في "قصة مدينتين" للكاتب الروائي تشارلز ديكنز