

Original Paper

Dickens' Tale of the French Revolution

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Abstract

Within *A Tale of Two Cities* Charles Dickens gives his interpretation of the French Revolution. A comparison of Dickens' representation to the actual events of the French Revolution will be attempted. The emphasis will be on Dickens' interpretation: his condemnation of power and the violence it leads those who possess it to inflict. The motives of his characters and his portrayal of events will be juxtaposed against those of historical records.

Introduction

Dickens purposely attempts to change the reader's understanding of the French Revolution during the passage of his novel. The beginning is filled with images of city folk and peasants alike awash in the worst kind of poverty you can imagine. He contrasts this with the aristocratic Frenchman who treats these people like they're not even human; people whose life is worthless in the aristocrat's eyes.

A sympathy develops for these poor wretches of Paris and the countryside of France. But as the novel winds along its revolutionary path the hopeless exact their revenge on the aristocrat in a way, especially in the city, that comes across as even more brutal than what the aristocrat has done to

them.

Dickens is condemning the violence of revolution, not any one class of people. Through the character Charles Darnay he condemns the all encompassing and arbitrary death of ill defined enemies of the Revolution. He writes about the intoxicating effects of power and the role revenge plays in inflicting the retribution of the city dweller on the aristocrat once that power has changed hands. For Dickens, those with power are to be feared, loathed, and despised; no matter who they are.

In comparing the Dickens novel to the actual events of the French Revolution *A Tale of Two Cities* can be divided into two spheres. The first is Dickens' description of the events and scenes that bring about and include the French Revolution. The second

deals with the actions of his main characters in the section St. Antoine of Paris.

The scenes and events include the general condition of the people, the storming of the Bastille, the September Massacres and the peasant uprisings.

The main woman character is Madame Defarge. Her motive for action is revenge on the Evremonde family and all those remotely related to them. This is quite different from what drove the real women of the French Revolutionary period. Her husband Monsieur Defarge's wine shop is portrayed as the center of activity during the time written about in the novel. No one place was the center of anything during the frenetic upheaval that was the French Revolution. As is often the case with literature that uses actual events in telling its story, Dickens is historically correct with some parts of his novel and is inaccurate in other areas.

I

Revenge is center stage throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*. The poor as a whole, and their individual characters in particular, all have self-justified cause to seek revenge on the aristocratic class ruling France. Dickens spends much time during the first half of his novel showing the reader how horrible their plight really is. The city people suffer from want and hunger. A wine cask breaks, spilling the wine all over the street. Everybody stops what they're doing and rushes toward the spot and frantically laps up the wine from the crags of cobblestone. They even "devoted themselves to the sodden and lee-dyed pieces of the cask, licking, and even champing the moister wine-rotted fragments with eager relish."¹¹

Dickens then describes the St. Antoine section of Paris: "Children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the

grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger."²) Hunger shows itself everywhere in St. Antoine. It is illustrated in their homes as, "straw and rag and wood and paper."³) And it is personified when it "stared down from smokeless chimneys, and started up from the filthy street that had no offal, among its refuse, of anything to eat."⁴) Through his description of hunger Dickens educates the reader about the privation of the masses in Paris. But he also forewarns of events to come. Only those instruments to be used to exact the section's revenge on those who they deem responsible for their penury were in good working order. "Nothing was represented in a flourishing condition, save tools and weapons; but, the cutler's knives and axes were sharp and bright, the smith's hammers were heavy, and the gunmaker's stock was murderous."⁵)

Dickens does not spare the reader the privations prevalent in the countryside either: "The village had its one poor street, with its poor brewery, poor tannery, poor tavern, poor stable yard, poor fountain, all usual poor appointments. It had its poor people too."⁶) Hunger could be readily seen as well: "Many were at the fountain, washing leaves, and grasses, and any such small yieldings of the earth that could be eaten."⁷) And the reason for their want was also stated: "The tax for the state, the tax for the church, the tax for the lord, tax local and general, were to be paid here and to be paid there, until the wonder was, that there was any village left unswallowed."⁸) Dickens emphasizes that poverty is widespread throughout France. The middle class is conspicuously absent in *A Tale of Two Cities* while the aristocracy is the only class able to live in comfort. The stark dichotomy between rich and poor is vital for Dickens because he wants the reader

to feel compassion for the lower class at the beginning of the novel.

All of this misery is contrasted with Monsieur the Marquis Evremonde, whose sorrow for the plight of the city dweller and the villager leaves little to the imagination. The revenge taken on him with his life is for both city and village and works as a metaphor for what will befall all who are perceived as against the Revolution.

The fate of the Marquis is initiated by the actions of his carriage driver. "Swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt and the horses reared and plunged."⁹ The Marquis' carriage had run over a child. The child's father, Gaspard, is in disconsolate grief when the wine shop owner Defarge tries to console him as only one who lives in the squalor of St. Antoine could: "Be a brave man, my Gaspard! It is better for the poor little plaything to die so, than to live. It has died in a moment without pain. Could it have lived an hour as happily."¹⁰

The Monsieur the Marquis, through his subsequent actions and words, proves Defarge's words of solace to be accurate. After offering a gold coin from his purse to assuage the grief and loss he has so suddenly brought to Gaspard, the Monsieur the Marquis is "driven away with the air of a gentleman who had accidentally broken some common thing, and had paid for it, and could afford to pay for it."¹¹ This satisfaction is interrupted by the coin being thrown back into the carriage and the Marquis letting the dregs of Paris know how he really feels about them. "I would ride over any of you willingly, and exterminate you from the earth."¹²

The Marquis rides on, without a hint of guilt, to his country chateau and meets his nephew Charles. Charles disagrees with the traditional aristocratic attitude toward the

populace that his uncle holds. The Marquis assures him his thinking has not changed. "Repression is the only lasting philosophy. The dark deference of fear and slavery, my friend, will keep the dogs obedient to the whip, as long as this roof shuts out the sky."¹³

Charles cannot change the Marquis' mind; the death of Gaspard's child won't change his mind; the horrible condition of the villagers around his chateau won't change his mind. The Marquis is the aristocracy's incorruptible. The symbol of the Ancien Regime, the Marquis embodies everything wrong with it.

The Marquis' revenge murder at the hands of the inconsolable Gaspard is the revenge of the poor on the rich. Dickens makes us feel it's wholeheartedly deserved, what with all the evidence of the Marquis' behavior he gave us leading up to the murder. The aristocracy's authority must be taken over by the lower class. But as this happens a realization gradually occurs to the reader that Dickens is not against one class of people. He is actually criticizing the destructive aspects of all privilege and power. When the masses of Paris take over power from the aristocracy will their rule be any less deleterious?

The answer begins with Gaspard. He is captured after he murders the Marquis and is taken to the prison in the murdered Marquis' domain. His captors injudicially resolve to bring him to the village fountain and they "hanged" him "there forty feet high and," he "is left hanging, poisoning the water."¹⁴ Back in Paris, in the section St. Antoine, Gaspard's friends, the wine shop keeper Defarge and others who go by the co-conspiratorial names of Jacques, find out this grisly news and promise to exact their revenge. "'How say you Jacques?' demanded Number One. 'To be registered?' 'To be registered as doomed to destruction' returned Defarge. 'The chateau and all the race?' inquired the first. 'The

chateau and all the race' returned Defarge. 'Extermination'"¹⁵⁾; and so the extermination begins.

Its bloodiest form comes in the description of the prison massacres in Paris. The grindstone serves as its symbol. It "had a double handle, and, turning at it madly were two men, whose faces were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages in their most barbarous disguise."¹⁶⁾ The blood of wanton murder was everywhere. The "hatchets, knives, bayonets, swords, all brought to be sharpened, were all red with it."¹⁷⁾

In this mad killing spree the masses threatened to exterminate one of their hero's close relatives, Charles Darnay, called Evremonde. Evremonde is holed up in La Force prison awaiting trial as an enemy of the people. But he is the son-in-law of a hero of the people, a former prisoner in the notorious Bastille prison, Dr. Alexandre Manette; Evremonde's father-in-law. In the only instance of leniency during this whole episode Dr. Manette persuades the killers to spare his son-in-law: "Help for the Bastille prisoner's kindred in La Force! Save the prisoner Evremonde at La Force."¹⁸⁾

Although saved from the murderers descending on La Force prison, Dr. Manette's son-in-law Charles Evremonde still has to face the Revolutionary Tribunal. Were their decisions arbitrary or fair? Were they influenced by others or did they judge a case on its merits alone? "Looking at the turbulent audience," it looked like "the felons were trying the honest men. The lowest, cruelest, and worst populace of a city were the directing spirits of the scene: noisily commenting, applauding, disapproving, anticipating, and precipitating the result, without a check."¹⁹⁾ Evremonde is lucky, for now, because when his witness is announced as Dr. Manette the

crowd instantaneously changes its mood from wanting his head to sympathizing with a man who had a former Bastille prisoner under the Ancien Regime as his witness. "Tears immediately rolled down several ferocious countenances which had been glaring at the prisoner a moment before, as if with impatience to pluck him out into the streets and kill him."²⁰⁾ Soon acquitted, Evremonde leaves the courtroom a free man. But he is soon followed by five other defendants who aren't so lucky: "So quick was the Tribunal to compensate itself and the nation for a chance lost, that these five came down to him before he left the place, condemned to die within twenty-four hours."²¹⁾

It is when Charles Darnay, called Evremonde, is taken before the Tribunal to face charges yet again that Dickens begins to tell us openly how he feels about the French Revolution. Dr. Manette, when he was put in the Bastille by the Evremonde family many years before, writes a letter that shows the Evremondes no mercy: "And them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I, Alexandre Manette, denounce to the times when all these things shall be answered for. I denounce them to Heaven and to earth."²²⁾ Little did the Doctor know then that his daughter would marry an Evremonde and put him in such an unbearable situation as to denounce his own son-in-law.

This event makes clear the vicious circle predominant in Dickens' story. Dr. Manette, treated inhumanely by the Ancien Regime, is used to destroy his son-in-law, treated just as unfairly by the Republic. One created the other and both are rotten to the core. Dickens believes in the destructiveness of absolute power. Only when this absolute power is brought under some kind of control will France cease to be in her convulsive state: "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 licence and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind."²³⁾ Dickens criticizes both the aristocracy and the Terror that results from its overthrow by the Parisian multitudes. He believes the current system will exhaust itself in bloody excess and hopes eventually the fatigue of revolution will allow something else to come to the fore.

II

Dickens of course plays with historical accuracy in *A Tale of Two Cities*. His portrayal of the life of the people of Paris however is true to the established record. Their impoverished life is clearly described when the historian Owen Connelly writes that "No single group was more important in setting the course of the Revolution than the workers of Paris" who "would not have moved but for hunger and unemployment."²⁴⁾ Peasants, however, when compared to the peasants of other countries, are better off: "In general, they were more prosperous than peasants anywhere on the Continent."²⁵⁾ As a result the Revolution "was largely an urban affair, to which the peasants, for the most part, passively consented."²⁶⁾

Dickens makes you think that in the city Defarge is the organizer of the whole Bastille takeover. "As a whirlpool of boiling waters has a centre point, so, all this raging circled around Defarge's wineshop."²⁷⁾ This of course was not the case. Incidents were going on in different places and at different times. In Jacques Godechot's *The Uprising of July 14th* we see some people from St. Antoine go to the Assembly of Electors and express their "anxiety about the warlike preparations being made by the Governor of the Bastille."²⁸⁾ And furthermore, as the crowd

moves to the Bastille their initial goal of demanding arms, powder, and bullets from the Governor undergoes a transmutation. Godechot tells us that "the object of the demonstration began to change, for already people might be heard in the crowd talking about taking the Bastille."²⁹⁾ Godechot goes on to quote the politician and man of letters Dusaulx who wrote: "the people...soon came and demanded from us the capture of this fortress."³⁰⁾ Clearly, the Bastille takeover was not a highly centralized, coordinated incident.

The role of women is also different in fact from what Dickens tells us. In the novel Madame Defarge is right with her husband as they head for the Bastille. She exhorts her fellow women to follow her: "'To me women!' cried Madame his wife. 'What! We can kill as well as the men when the place is taken.'"³¹⁾ But in Darline Gay Levy and Harriet Branson Applewhite's account *Parisian Women: Gains and Losses* the women's role at the taking of the Bastille is distinctly apart from the Bastille itself. "Women were also active in the conquest of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, and most conspicuously in the destruction of the toll gates surrounding Paris at the time of the insurrection."³²⁾

Dickens is faithful to the true historical account of the taking of the Bastille when he portrays the conquerers as regular people from St. Antoine: Artisans, wine merchants, tailors, dyers, locksmiths and cabinetmakers just to name a few. They were not those people who would later play a pivotal role in the Revolution's future: "Of the men who were later to play a political role during the Revolution, very few were present."³³⁾

Around the same time as the taking of the Bastille there was the Great Fear in the countryside of France. Dickens incorporates the Great Fear into his novel with the burning

of the Evremonde chateau. Carefully planned, it was revenge for the hanging of Gaspard; whose baby had been run over by Monsieur the Marquis Evremonde's carriage as it was leaving Paris. The planning that went into burning the chateau is quite evident. The plotters' codenames are Jacques. The destruction of the chateau will not commence until the leader arrives from Paris. His arrival is easily identifiable: "He said, in a dialect that was just intelligible: 'How goes it Jacques?'"³⁴⁾ Then they went about their malevolent work: "Four heavy-treading, unkempt figures striding on cautiously to come together in the courtyard. Four lights broke out there and all was black again. Presently, the chateau began to make itself strangely visible by some light of its own, as though it were growing luminous."³⁵⁾

The Great Fear saw its share of chateau burning as well, but for different reasons. The peasants were angry over a lack of food and didn't want to pay feudal dues any longer. Connelly states that "here and there peasants marched on chateaux of lords, demanding the abolition of feudal dues"³⁶⁾ and that the fear itself was not the result of "events in Paris. It had begun months before as a series of bread riots"³⁷⁾; quite different from the revenge motive of Dickens.

Something that is closer to the truth is Dickens' version of the September Massacres of 1792. He vividly writes about La Force prison and the people who do the killing there: "Their hideous countenances were all bloody and sweaty, and all awry with howling, and all staring and glaring with beastly excitement and want of sleep."³⁸⁾ The weapons used, and the amount of blood spilled, are forcefully presented to the reader through the gatherings at the grindstone. If anything, his account brings the reality of this merciless killing into better perspective than

the historical descriptions do: "The eye could not detect one creature in the group free from the smear of blood. Shouldering one another were men stripped to the waist, with the stain all over their limbs and bodies."³⁹⁾

Connelly, in his description of the massacres, paints a similar picture: "Mobs formed and invaded the prisons, killing 'priests and aristocrats' and their presumed sympathizers outright. Suspicious looking persons were hacked to death on the streets. In five days the people executed some 11,000 'enemies'".⁴⁰⁾ But his description does not equal Dickens': Dickens gives the reader more emotion. You can feel the violence, anger and hatred.

These events serve for Dickens as proof of what he believes is the result of power in the French Revolution: revenge and violence. In the historical sense these events push the French Revolution on into its continuing unanticipatable future. Both ways strive toward the same conclusion however. Whatever may have been solved in the aftermath of these events, such massacres will not bring the Revolution to any kind of satisfactory conclusion.

Through Madame Defarge, Dickens sets out to show that her personal motive of revenge is the driving force behind her actions. Members of her family were killed by the Evremondes and she has promised herself that she will get revenge on them. "The Evremonde people are to be exterminated, and the wife and child must follow the husband and father."⁴¹⁾ Madame Defarge's revenge is so all encompassing that anyone married to an Evremonde must die and the children as well.

But Levy and Applewhite show the Parisian women to have been more concerned with the political goings on in Paris and the day to day problem of having enough to eat. "Anxieties about subsistence led them to take

leading roles in market disturbances and riots."⁴²⁾ They were ready to take on the government if their families weren't fed: "Nothing less fundamental than the legitimacy of the monarchy was at stake when subsistence matters were raised."⁴³⁾ Women also got involved politically. At the Champs de Mars petitions for the trial of the King in the aftermath of his attempted escape to Varennes were being signed. Some disturbances arose from this and the National Guard was called in to calm things down but instead ended up killing some people. One Constance Evrard was arrested for threatening to stab one of these guardsmen as they made their way to the Champs de Mars. "She had gone to the Champ de Mars and had signed a petition like all good patriotic women"⁴⁴⁾ and couldn't believe the guardsmen were killing these brave revolutionaries.

Like Madame Defarge, women were involved directly in revolutionary events but for different reasons. Food and the future rule of France preoccupied them; not the complicated personal revenge that drove Madame Defarge.

Madame Defarge's husband is depicted as the leader of St. Antoine and it seems the whole Revolution in Paris. To be fair, as George Rude points out in his paper *The Rioters*, the people of the Faubourg Saint Antoine, "initiated and dominated the Reveillon riots, the capture of the Bastille, and the overthrow of the monarchy, and played an outstanding part in the revolution of May-June 1793 and the popular revolt of Prairial."⁴⁵⁾

Not all the embryonic action of the French Revolution however emanated from St. Antoine, nor did St. Antoine have only one leader as Dickens would lead you to believe. His use of a spy is instructive in showing how he centers all activity in St. Antoine at

Defarge's wineshop. When the spy enters the Defarge wine shop the usually busy place makes itself empty when Madame Defarge pins her rose in her headdress. "It was remarkable. Two men had entered separately, when, catching sight of that novelty, they went away. Nor, of those who had been there when the visitor entered, was there one left."⁴⁶⁾ Then when the spy leaves, "Saint Antoine had an instinctive sense that the objectionable decoration was gone; howbeit, the Saint took courage to lounge in, very shortly afterwards, and the wineshop recovered its habitual aspect."⁴⁷⁾

Revolutionary activity was not centered in the Faubourg St. Antoine. It was very decentralized. Richard Cobb makes this clear in *A Critique* when he writes that "within each Section, effective power is exercised by small minorities of revolutionary militants—twelve or twenty men at the most."⁴⁸⁾ The circle of power in Dickens' St. Antoine is too small and too concentrated; even with Defarge's wife and his henchmen, "the Jacques."

Dickens, however, is able to give his characters personalities that we can either sympathize or disagree with and at other times revile. In the broad scope of the Revolution this is something the historical accounts have more difficulty with. Cobb brings this up when talking about Albert Soboul's research on the Sans-culottes. "He does name the militants, but he does not give any of them the benefit of a personality,"⁴⁹⁾ and he doesn't tell us "whether they were sincere or were timeservers, whether they had sound sense or were crackpots."⁵⁰⁾

Conclusion

What Dickens does is personalize the French Revolution for us. He brings us into contact with people directly affected by its

events and draws us into the conflict in a subjective way. We find ourselves rooting for or loathing the characters in his novel. In the historical accounts on the other hand we are on the outside looking in. The events are being relayed to us. We are passive observers to the event. The literature strives to put passion into our understanding of the history. This is the big difference between *A Tale of Two Cities* and historical accounts of the event. The fact that Dickens does not describe all events accurately is not a problem, for that is not his job. By developing

feelings for his characters we involve ourselves more directly in the times and thus include ourselves within the actual events.

In Dickens' final paragraphs he sums up his opinion about this time. When *his* story ends he realizes the whole story isn't over: "Through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out."⁵¹ If he is prescient about the French Revolution up to this point then maybe the feeling he generates in his novel is right as well.

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Notes

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