

Violence in a tale of two cities



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The storming of the Bastille, the death carts with their doomed human cargo, the swift drop of the guillotine blade – this is the French Revolution that Charles Dickens vividly captures in his famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. With dramatic eloquence, he brings to life a time of terror and treason, a starving people rising in frenzy and hate to overthrow a corrupt and decadent regime. Dickens not only captures the brutality and corruption of this period, but gives insight into what propelled the death and destruction. Through the hostility between the French aristocrats and the peasants, Dickens highlights the principal that violence perpetuates even more violence, until the sinister chain eventually exhausts itself. The oppression of the French people by the ruling class in the eighteenth century is an infamous time in history. During this time, the aristocrats had no respect for the less fortunate of their nation. Dickens illustrates the aristocratic attitude toward the peasants with Dr. Charles Mannett's account of how one aristocrat treated his servant who failed to answer the door in a pleasing amount of time. It [the door] was not opened immediately, in answer to the ringing of the bell and one of my two conductors struck the man who opened it, with his heavy riding-glove, across the face. There was nothing in this action to attract my particular attention, for I had seen common people treated more commonly than dogs. This quotation shows how the poor were looked down upon by the rich. The wealthy treated the poor like dogs instead of people. Dickens also uses the Marquis Evremonde to give a similar portrait of the aristocracy as elitist. The Marquis orders his carriage to be raced through the city streets, delighting to see the commoners nearly run down by horses. All at once, however, the carriage comes to a stop with “ a sickening little jolt.” A child lies dead under its wheels. The Marquis displays

no sympathy for Gaspard, the father of the boy whom his carriage crushes. Rather, he believes that his noble blood justifies his malicious treatment of his lower-class subjects. Dickens says that the Marquis views the commoner as “mere rats come out of their holes” (101). In tossing the coins to Gaspard, he aims merely to buy his way out of the predicament and rid his own conscience of the nuisance of Gaspard’s grief. He wholeheartedly believes that it is the commoners’ lot in life to struggle. The nobles’ treatment of the common people was so abominable that Ernest Defarge comforts Gaspard by telling him, “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?” (101). The Marquis’ blatant cruelty and antipathy spurred Gaspard to seek vengeance by any means necessary. Gaspard believed that the best way to accomplish this was to murder his son’s killer. This vengeful cycle is further perpetuated by Gaspard’s execution and then by a group of revolutionaries who called themselves the Jacquarie, who vow to avenge Gaspard’s death. This new revenge was to take the shape of the extermination of the remaining members of the Marquis’ family, and the destruction of his castle. The group fulfilled their vow. They killed who they thought was the son of the Marquis, and they destroyed his estate. So, a chain of violence that begins with one murder multiplies until it ends with the destruction of a castle and the death of four human beings. The masses of oppressed Frenchman, having had all these forcefully repressive and sadistic acts put upon them, reacted in a way that shows precisely Dickens’ message: the people of France rebelled. Their first reciprocal act of violence was the storming of the Bastille, a prison in Paris that contained all the political enemies of the French crown. The mob, seeing this as the symbol of their

repression, struck out at it in an unforgettable frenzy. "... [A] forest of naked arms... all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon that was thrown up..." (198). "...cannon, muskets, fire and smoke... flashing weapons, blazing torches..." (200). This was the scene at the storming of the Bastille, the culmination of the aggressive acts that had been inflicted on the poor. The aristocrats' violent actions begot the violent actions of the peasants. The storming of the Bastille, which was the beginning of the French Revolution, was the repercussion of the bloodshed and starvation caused by the upper-class. Throughout the revolution, one harrowing figure stood out among the mob as the most evil of them all: Madame Defarge. In the storming of the Bastille she was very active, and "... armed alike in hunger and revenge" (200). Madame Defarge had no qualms about using these most sinister instruments when the opportunity came. After the governor had been killed by the mob, and lay dead upon the street, " she put her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife – long ready – she hewed off his head" (203). Evidently, Madame Defarge had no problem with carrying out such a gruesome act. Madame Defarge also had a personal vendetta to fulfill in the revolution. Her brother, sister, and her sister's husband had been killed by Marquis Evremonde. Even after the Marquis' murder, she was determined to kill his entire line which included Charles Darney, his wife Lucie, and their daughter. However, Madame Defarge's quest for vengeance ultimately ends in her own death. The chain that began with the murder of Madame Defarge's family was continued by Madame Defarge's acts of violent retribution, and eventually culminated in Madame Defarge's own death. Three major events link together into a series of death, violence, destruction. In conclusion, in A Tale of Two Cities it is obvious that

Dickens deeply sympathizes with the plight of the French peasants by emphasizing the cruelty inflicted upon them. Although Dickens condemns this oppression, he also condemns the peasants' strategies in overcoming it. For in fighting cruelty with cruelty, the peasants only perpetuate the violence that they themselves have suffered. Dickens' most concise view of revolution comes in the final chapter, in which he notes the slippery slope from the oppressed to the oppressor: " Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind. (347)" Though Dickens sees the French Revolution as a great symbol of transformation and resurrection, he emphasizes that its violent means were ultimately negating.