

Charles dickens novel – a tale of two cities

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There is no doubt that “A tale of two cities” is a tragic novel. It certainly contains a large number of melodramatic and sensational incidents and situations, but Dickens has not given us these scenes and situations merely for the sake of melodrama and sensationalism. It would be unfair to say that he loves violence and bloodshed for its own sake.

The melodramatic and sensational incidents and episodes here are integral to the plot and the design of the novel. Dickens’s object in writing this story was to depict the fortunes or the misfortunes of a group of private individuals against the background of French Revolution and to show how private persons are drawn into the whirlpool of injustice and violence much against their own will.

The tragedy in the lives of Dr. Manette, Lucie and Darney and that of Sydney Carton amply illustrates this point of view. Almost all the melodramatic and sensational incidents are connected with the French Revolution which was a historical fact.

This novel is first of all the tragedy of Dr. Manette. This man was a promising young physician, leading a quiet and peaceful life with his wife in the city of Paris.

His life was blighted by the cruelty of the two Evremonde brothers who took him to attend upon a dying young girl and her dying young brother, and who afterwards had him thrown into the Bastille because he had the daring to report to the authorities the gross misdemeanor of the Evremonde brothers and their responsibility in bringing about the deaths of an innocent young girl and an innocent young boy belonging to one of their tenant-families.

He remained a prisoner in the Bastille for as many as eighteen years during which he lost his mind and took to shoe-making in order to occupy himself, even after his release from imprisonment he is still a broken man both in body and in mind. His life is a wreck.

"A Tale of Two Cities" is a preponderantly serious and tragic novel. But it is not lacking in humor. According to some critics this novel is notoriously deficient in humor. But to expect too much humor in a novel which is designed as a tragedy would evidently be absurd.

Too much of humor would have weakened and diluted the emotional effect which the author intended to produce by his tragic scenes and situations. In spite of the tragic quality of much of the story, the novel contains an abundance of humor, which provides emotional relief and which breaks the monotony of the serious and somber tone of much of the narration.

The chapters which deal with Mr. Stryver and his plans to marry Lucie are wholly comic. So are the chapters dealing with Jerry Cruncher, his family life, and his fishing expedition.

Jerry Cruncher is meant to be a comic character. In this novel the comedy produced by this character is very amusing and interesting. For instance, as he rides back to London with Mr. Lorry's message "recalled to life" for his employers, he feels puzzled and bewildered by the wording of the message and thinks that Mr. Lorry must have been drunk when he spoke these words. Jerry tells himself that he would be in a "blazing bad way if recalling to life were to come into fashion".

We realize the significance of this remark only later in the novel when we find that Jerry is carrying on the side-business of digging out dead bodies from their graves and selling them to a surgeon. Evidently, if recalling to life were to come into fashion, Jerry would be deprived of this side-business.

Mr. Stryver is another comic character in the novel. About this man, the author tells us that he had a way of 'shouldering himself morally and physically into companies and conversations'. Mr. Stryver is really a go-getter and a gate-crasher. He is a self-opinionated man with an inflated ego.

He is proud of having made a rapid progress in the legal profession of which he is a member; and he speaks to Carton and to others in a pompous manner about his achievements. He is pig-headed enough to think that what a girl expects in her would-be husband is just wealth and position; and so he thinks that, if he makes a proposal of marriage to Lucie, she would jump at the opportunity.

The characters of this novel are symbolic. Madam Defarge, for instance, is a symbolic character and she symbolizes unlimited hatred and evil. She certainly has a motive and a reason for her revengeful and blood-thirsty attitude, but all her vindictiveness and blood thirstiness cannot be explained in terms of that motive and that reason.

She becomes almost a personification of hatred, revenge and violence. Her very knitting acquires a sinister significance and becomes a symbol of revolutionary ruthlessness and resolve because in the knitting are "registered" the names of those who must be exterminated.

Miss Pross is a personification of love. Her attachment to Lucie is deep and abiding. In the tussle between Madame Defarge and Miss Pross, the Frenchwoman is killed by a bullet from her own pistol. The symbolic meaning of this incident is that hatred and evil are self-destructive, and that, in any contest between hatred and love, love must come out victorious.