

# La guillotine: dickens' philosophical use of figurative language



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Lasting from 1789 to 1799, the French Revolution is characterized by the uprising of the lower class and the bloodshed associated with it. It is now recognized as the most violent, inhumane revolution in European history, and with it came new ideas of philosophy and human nature. Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities* demonstrates these ideas through contrasting areas of Europe, England and France, during the time of the Revolution. Charles Darnay, the book's protagonist, comes from a line of wealthy French aristocrats, but disagrees with their loose morality and denounces his family name, moving to England. There, he meets Lucie Manette, daughter of the well-respected Dr. Manette, whom he marries. Upon returning to France, however, he is put on trial for immigrating to England and is sentenced to death. Dickens's characteristic writing style utilizes figurative language to describe the Revolution in detail. Throughout the novel, Dickens uses figurative language to portray that humanity is naturally evil, through themes of violence, chaos, and conflict between social classes.

At the center of Dickens's concept of humanity is their bloodthirst, conveyed through personification and symbolic characters. Perhaps the most memorable propaganda of the time period, the guillotine was introduced in 1789, at the Revolution's beginning. Originally invented to make executions faster and cleaner, the guillotine was used as a fear tactic by the rising peasants as a warning to the nobility. In the novel, however, Dickens seems to make it its own character, and the description and personification he uses simulates its impact on the French people. He writes, "Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from

the foundations of the world-the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine...Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded" (271). Throughout the chapter, Dickens continues to refer to the guillotine as "she" and "her" rather than "it". This figurative language shows the way that most rational people would see it-as a cold, heartless villain. However, the excerpt contradicts this idea. Rather than fearing the guillotine, the French peasants celebrate it, wearing models as necklaces. The bloodthirst of the society Dickens describes celebrates death, looks forward to executions, and cares little about the lives wasted at the hands of the guillotine. The personification of the guillotine helps further the motif of bloodthirst. Another example of the motif is used through characters, specifically Jacques Three. The Jacqueses are a group of French peasants who assist Madame Defarge, a ruthless revolutionary, in seeking out and destroying aristocrats. Dickens labels Jacques Three as the most savage of the Jacqueses, especially as he speaks to Madame Defarge about the execution of Charles Darnay, when he suggests killing Darnay's family as well. He says, "She has a fine head for it...The child also...has golden hair and blue eyes. And we seldom have a child there. It is a pretty sight!" (351). Jacques speaks of Manette's young daughter in this excerpt, almost lusting over the idea of a small girl being beheaded before a crowd. It matters not to him that she is so young or that she is innocent of any crime. The bloodthirst of the French people has surpassed justice for the poorly treated lower class; it has become a desire to watch as many as possible be publicly slaughtered. Jacques embodies everything Dickens sees wrong with the people of the French Revolution and humanity in general, as he lets his desires take over

his morality. Dickens uses Jacques and the personification of the guillotine to depict humanity in all its bloody evil.

Dickens's use of themes of mob mentality shows his belief that humans are instinctively uncivilized and chaotic. Along with the guillotine, the French Revolution left behind a legacy of human chaos, coining the term "mob mentality" as a way to describe the phenomenon that was occurring. This (what) is especially prevalent in Dickens's description of the Storming of the Bastille. An actual historical event of the time period, thousands of angry revolutionaries banded together to destroy the Bastille, a national prison. The language he uses to describe the storming sticks out to the reader, giving them a sense of franticness. He writes, "With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, 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 began" (214). As storming a prison as large as the Bastille was unprecedented and historically relevant, it is difficult for an author to illustrate the magnitude of the pandemonium that ensued. However, Dickens compares the event to a stormy sea, alarm bells, and the sound of drums, thus giving the reader a sense of the unruliness and outrageousness of the attack. It is also a significant example of mob mentality, as for the first time groups of unrelated, unfamiliar people join forces to destroy a common enemy. A storming as massive as Dickens writes it is implied to be the result of an extremely large group of people working together, which supports the theme of mob mentality. The cooperation of these people seems natural, almost instinctive, showing that Dickens

believes chaos to be the natural state of humanity. Another example of this theme is shown in the first scene in Paris, when a wine shop window breaks, spilling wine into the street. The peasants, starving and in poverty, eagerly soak up the wine and attempt to preserve it as they can no longer afford it. The event quickly escalates into complete disarray, as fights break out over the wine and children run free. Dickens writes, " A shrill sound of laughter and of amused voices-voices of men, women, and children-resounded in the street while this wine game lasted. There was a little roughness in the sport" (37). Dickens describes this event as a game, as if the fight is nothing but rough playfulness. Children act like this situation is a normal affair, playing and laughing amongst the wreckage. The scene is not only used to display the turmoil of the French lower class, but also shows the economic instability of the time period, as peasants are willing to drink wine off the street in order to have something to drink. The mass disorder of the wine spill shows an instinctive, almost animalistic reaction to stimuli in time of need, proving that humans tend toward chaos. The figurative language used to describe the storming of the Bastille and the wine shop scene depict Dickens's belief of natural chaos as a human trait.

Hatred between social classes was the driving force behind the French Revolution, and Dickens uses this theme through contrasting characters. Revolutionaries of the time period argued that the nobility of France was nothing but arrogant, unsympathetic, and selfish. This belief is embodied through Monseigneur. He is hated throughout town for being heartless and cruel, and in one scene in specific, he cares nothing for a father whose child he recklessly kills with his carriage. Monseigneur says, " It is extraordinary to

me...that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is for ever in the way. How do I know what injury you have done to my horses?" (116). It is clear through Monseigneur's way of speaking that he is not at all sorry for the child's death, and furthermore seems to look down on the lower class. To him, they are unworthy creatures of filth that are trapped in poverty by their own fault. Only concerned with his own wealth, he lacks the heart that the lower class seems to possess. Dickens uses him as a vessel to represent the prejudice the nobility holds over the peasants, and from the way the citizens react to him, it is clear that this is normal for most noblemen. Dickens's belief that humans naturally hold prejudice over the less fortunate is presented with the use of Monseigneur. Contrastingly, Dickens also shows the hatred the lower class has in return for the wealthy through Madame Defarge. Madame Defarge is known for being ruthless and extreme, carrying with her a list of aristocrats she deems worthy of execution. Though no character seems to know why she possesses so much hatred, it is evident that she is used as a symbol of this hatred. Dickens writes, " A brooding sense of wrong, and an inveterate hatred of a class, opportunity had developed her into a tigress. She was absolutely without pity. If she had ever had the virtue in her, it had quite gone out of her" (353). Madame Defarge is in many ways similar to Monseigneur, as they are both symbols of the hatred between social classes and are characterized by lack of heart. Defarge's hatred for the upper class is likely due to their exorbitant lifestyle that caused an economic crisis in France in the first place, and as the excerpt states, this hatred has led to a decline of her virtue and rationality. Though these characters come from vastly different backgrounds, both contain extreme contempt for their

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opposite social class, showing that Dickens believes this trait to be common of all humans, rather than one of a singular social class. Dickens uses Monseigneur and Madame Defarge to embody the differences and conflict between levels of hierarchy that is natural to the human race.

As one of the most well known historical fiction books of all time, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* does more than retell the story of the French Revolution. It brings the reader a pessimistic concept of humanity, stating that as a race, humans tend towards violence, chaos, and hatred. However, what is most impressive about Dickens's work is his portrayal of these themes, using description, personification, and characters to embody what he sees as basic flaws of humanity, and in the perfect, primitive setting—the French Revolution. Though Dickens's themes appear to be despondent and hopeless, the positive ending of the novel implies that if society upholds civilized virtues and morals, it can overcome these tendencies and accomplish greatness.