

# Gft. world lit.-4

History, French Revolution



Gft. World Lit.-4 22 April 2012 Sea Imagery in Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities In Charles Dickens's Book A Tale of Two Cities, he illustrates the French Revolution and its effect on the people. Through the stories of revolutionaries, upper-class, and lower-class citizens he creates a dichotomy between Paris, France, and London, England, to caution England about what will happen if their government continues to run as France's does. Dickens uses imagery of the sea to warn that a hellacious government leads to an equally hellacious revolt. The focus of Dickens's book centers on the hellacious government that rules France. Aristocracy and upper-class society work the puppet of the country's government. Cover to cover, " The novel actually begins and ends with a description of the nobility's abuses of the poor. " (Gonzalez-Posse 347). The book's first words form a dichotomy between the lives of each class. Then in the final lines, Sydney Carton remarks on his sacrifice as he awaits the guillotine pressed on him by the wrath of the government. In the book, Darnay battles with his uncle, Monsieur de Marquis, about the unfair treatment from the aristocracy and that because of it " France in all such things is changed for the worse" (Dickens 127). Darnay's concern about the manipulation and use of lower classes to socially raise people, like his uncle, heightens as they discuss the treatment, lack of acknowledgment, and to admit their neglect. Dickens uses this to prove the government's dreadfulness. Most any peasant before 1775 experienced hardships, but without attention it worsens. Government has no disregard during this time as to how they treated their people and most provocatively demonstrate it " In perhaps the novel's cruelest scene, soldiers play upon a common taboo and allow an executed man's blood to run into a

village well, knowing that the community will be obliterated. " (Rosen 94). Darnay continues to press his argument on his uncle about aristocracy's abuses protesting that " Even in my father's time we did a world of wrong, injuring every human creature who came between us and our pleasure whatever it was. " (Dickens 128). Darnay's disagrees with how people utilize money and status to tyrannize those lower than them to achieve even their smallest goals. On a less violent note, some just refuse to recognize the problem with France's people. Dickens demonstrates how the aristocracy lives the high life by showing how one " Monseigneur could swallow a great many things with ease, and was by some few sullen minds supposed to be rather rapidly swallowing France. " (Dickens 109). Upper-class citizens indulging in luxuries pay no mind to the poor around them who made up the great majority of the country. They have money to eat and " swallow" any food they pleased while others scavenge daily for a possible dinner. Looking back at the history of events leading up to the Revolution, " There is, no doubt a great deal of truth in this view of the matter, " (Stephen 155). The hellacious government oppresses the people of France. Devastation did not rule France before the cruel wrath of the aristocracy reigned over. In Dickens's book, he displays a scene of Mr. Lorry when he first meets Lucie Manette and " a sudden vivid likeness passed before him, of a child whom he had held in his arms on the passage across that very channel on cold time when the hail drifted heavily and the sea ran high. " (29). Lucie lost her family as a baby, her father to the Bastille and her mother to death, so Mr. Lorry takes her away from France to grow in England. Times have not yet reached the peak of pain; the people's spirits run high with hope. Dickens

uses sea imagery throughout the book to demonstrate the intersections between social classes who had believed themselves to live as parallels before. Now things have changed, “ The centuries of aristocratic rule have left France a waste land. ” (Rosen 93). Nothing in France lives anymore, death, depression, and oppression have left France desecrated. The French lose all hope as they prepare to storm the Bastille, “ Every living creature there held life as of no account, and was demented with a passionate readiness to sacrifice it. ” (Dickens 221). No lone soul in the crowd troubles with what might become of them or those around them. The ability to reason a life threatening situation over survival has lost them and the mob prepares to lay their lives down. Oppression consumes the nation and even the corruption of friendship befalls them. Successful lawyer Mr. Stryver differs very much from his assistant and friend Sydney Carton in Dickens’s book. Stryver treats Carton as below him and conveys himself as, “ dragging his useful friend in his wake, like a boat towed astern. ” (Dickens 211). Stryver uses Carton to accomplish his drive to excel socially, pulling Carton through the rough waves of upset that he creates. As a whole, the people of France find joy in watching the brutal executions of others hoping that it will satisfy the aristocracy’s thirst for blood. Oppression drives them to the point where trials rush and every sentence reaps death. In the event of Darnay’s trial, Dickens renders the justice system as, “ the public current of the time set too strong and too fast for him. ” (270). The jury and the spectators press for a quick trial ending in death. Darnay frets he will not get the chance to defend his self. This behavior is only a result of the government’s oppression, “ While a great part of the novel is spent detailing the violence

surrounding the storming of the Bastille and the beginnings of the Reign of Terror, the narrative is punctuated by reminders of the kind of violent abuses that instigated this anger in the first place. " (Gonzalez-Posse 347). Terrors of the government send the people into frenzy; they want to take an eye for an eye. This only proves Dickens's point, " that violence and oppression only lead to more of the same. " (Gonzalez-Posse 347). The evidence indicates that the government leaves the people of France with only one choice, to return the violent acts that have devastated them. When presented with a life threatening situation, human instinct leaves one with two choices; fight or flight. Threat of life though will usually end in strive for survival. The oppressed in Dickens's book choose to fight for their survival through violence. One critic discusses this choice, " there are two possible ways in which violence may be exorcised: first, as a spontaneous release from slavishness through self-regardless violence... second, as a calculated retreat from self-abandonment toward the use of violence against others in an attempt to make one's transcendent liberation endure in the world." (Kucich 101). The people have the ability to unleash themselves on the government without warning or organization. These instances would be each individual lash out at the government but they would not ensure freedom. Their second possible choice of violence brings rebellion in groups such as the storming of the Bastille where everyone gives up everything to achieve one common goal. Trouble arises for more than just the aristocracy though, " For both men, the Revolution is a tumultuous 'sea' with spinning whirlpools. Innately violent Mother Nature replaces the civilized order" (Bloom 22). Hardships and trials arise for all social classes, confusion runs wild amongst the people

brought on by nature making the Revolution inevitable. The crowd surrounding Monsieur Defarge compels him to fight during the storming of the Bastille, " So resistless was the force of the ocean bearing on him," (Dickens 251). The strength of passion in the mass of angry people around Defarge raises a feeling within him, mob mentality, to fight as well. Dickens uses the word " resistless" to illustrate that fighting back this feeling, the uncontrollable urge to do as those around him, cannot be done. Fighting as a unified group derives from the human instincts when oppressed, " It follows the Revolution's progression as the downtrodden peasants unite to overthrow their oppressors, " (Gonzalez-Posse 345). Naturally, struggle for survival pushes one to destroy or vanquish whatever puts them at risk. The French peasants as a whole realize that this brute force presents itself as their only way to save themselves. Blood flows like small streams through the cobblestone streets in every violent scene of Dickens's book. The government brings it on first when a cask of wine breaks in the streets and people are on their hands and knees lapping it up like dogs because they are so starved from poverty. A man writes " BLOOD" on the walls and the wine stains lips and hands as if it truly were. As the book progresses, the peasants bring out the bloodshed. In the beginning, Mr. Lorry takes a walk along the beach. While looking at the rocks and other things brought to the surface by the waves, now tumbling around, Dickens portrays it for his readers, " the sea did what it liked, and what it like was destruction. " (Dickens 27-28). Up until this point Dickens has not had enough time to make too many references to the people French as " the sea". Instead of speaking of them directly he foreshadows the upcoming revolution about to strike and the

devastation it will cause. After the scene where the cask splits, lamplighters illuminate the street with the dim glow of candles and here Dickens introduces, " Indeed they were at sea and the ship and crew were in peril of tempest. " (Dickens 39). The oppressed hold up the aristocracy because, after all, there would be no upper-class without a lower-class to hold them up. Government can not exist without residents to govern. The word " peril" implies the imminent danger of a storm that cannot be avoided, the Revolution where peasants will rock and threaten the lives of those they uphold. Storms like the one Dickens predicts bring deacease and ruin in the most upsetting of ways. Those who were once civilized humans are now raging, " When the mob turns homicidal, its impulse is plainly cannibalistic, with its victims often torn limb from limb. " (Rosen 95). Primitive aspects of human nature buried under years of manners from society's rules break free from hiding places and unfold on the aristocracy and government of France. Dickens fast forwards his readers though time when the revolution has not yet ended, "-the firm earth shaken by the rushes of an angry ocean which had no ebb, but was always on the flow, higher and higher to the terror and wonder of the beholders on the shore-" (Dickens 231). The Revolution has failed to die down. Instead it persistency in its action holds the attention of the aristocracy and government who have not so far suffered from it and now await its arrival. While the Revolution wares on, those participating in it see it unravel only in a moment. In the grindstone scene, peasants work hastily to sharpen their weapons, to a viewer, " All this was seen in the vision of a drowning man..." (Dickens 260). The adrenaline rush from the fear of the killings about to take place clutters the mind making the processing of this

moment all too quick. The minds of unstoppable revolutionaries are not thinking, just the primal instinct to attack. Psychology explains it as, " this yearning for the pure release of self-violence is identified as the ultimate form of desire for freedom, " (Kucich 101). The hellacious aggression exhibited by the oppressed people of France reflects the crimes done to them before. This natural passion once repressed does not break out with such hate until a desperate cause arises. Oppression leaves the people of France with two choices. Fighting confirms the only logical answer where as flight would have them run away to another oppressed county. Revolution supplies the only sufficient means of revenge, " The novel presents two sources of violence, the heartless and reckless disdain of the nobility and the base savagery of the rebelling masses responding to it. " (Gonzalez-Posse 347). The two way road here makes cruelty a give and take relationship between social classes. From the lower-class's point of view, the only fair way for revenge has the aristocracy undergo the same level of pain as they do. Peasants suffer from starvation, disease, and death. While the lower-class does not have the ability to deprive the upper-class of their money and lavish riches, they can however cause a violent uproar in physical pain to meet the level of their own. So in essence, the Revolution lacks the unnecessary gore some believe it has, instead a reasonable reaction to the upper-class's malice government and, " The people, says Mr. Dickens, in effect, had been degraded by long and gross misgovernment and acted like wild beasts in consequence. " (Stephen 155). The oppressed French justify their actions and choices because the government inflicts pain on them first. The carefree government, practically run by the aristocracy, can be called



corrupt for their crimes against the people. Freedom must be obtained through violence and this “ can arguably be said to be moved by laudable motives, such as a desire to overturn OPPRESSION and avenge or protect their loved ones. ” (Gonzalez-Posse 347). Examples for justification of the lower-class’s choices come in high frequency in Dickens’s book. Talking of an upper-classman, visual appearances show just how different the two classes are, “ his stockings, was as white as the tops of the waves that broke upon the neighboring beach, or the specs of sail that glinted in the sunlight far at sea. ” (Dickens 27). To have enough money to be able to have garments as clean as Dickens describes them here has become unreal. Specifically, when around 97% of France’s population does not have money to buy daily bread. The sea imagery used here describes the small number of people who can afford to live this way. They come few and far between like droplets of water on a boat’s sail, or white caps of waves. Justice for the oppressed finds its way solitarily through violence making their choices for revolution feasible, “ The liberating intentions behind the lower classes’ violence, however, are only a response to the repressive image of non-human freedom and the ‘ represented’ violence that defined the power of the class of Monseigneur. ” (Kucich 102). Upper-class, defined as having money, power, and influence, abuses of lower-classes and influences government to allow them to get away with it. Lower-class citizens require a violent revolution to gain freedom from their oppressors, without it they would be driven to ruin. The misgovernment of France leads to the oppression of its lower-class. Aristocracy abuses their power through violence and eventually pushes the lower-class into a position where they feel their lives threatened. Human

instinct tells the oppressed that they must fight back in order to gain their safety and their freedom. The government's violent oppression causes the Revolution, " Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind. " (Dickens 381). Dickens's writes this book to warn England that if they continue to poorly govern their country as France does then they will inevitably have a revolution of their own on their hands.