

# **Charles Dickens and the Two Revolutions**

## **A Comparative Study on *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Hard Times***

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### **1. Introduction**

Charles Dickens wrote two novels inspired by revolutions: The French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and the Industrial Revolution in *Hard Times* (1854). In this essay, Dickens's uses of the people (the commoners and the labourers), the demagogue (Madame Defarge and Slackbridge), and the martyr (Sydney Carton and Stephen Blackpool) in the two novels will be described, compared, and examined, which results in my analysis that the two novels are – while having significant differences as well – common in its structure and the uses of fear and sympathy, reflecting the author's ambivalent attitude towards their respective revolutions. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is set in the time of the French Revolution, the conflict is between the aristocrats and the commoners. In *Hard Times*, set in the era of Industrial Revolution, while conflict between the capitalists and the labourers is obvious, conflict between the majority and the minority within the labour union is a crucial issue as well, and this essay will investigate mainly the latter case.

It is necessary to ask whether the narrator of the novel and the author can be equaled or not. Sylvere Monod argues that “in the case of *A Tale of Two Cities* it is obvious that there was an exceptionally close link between the book and the author, between the narrative and the man Charles Dickens, who asserted in his brief but striking preface that ‘throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me’ and significantly added: ‘I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself.’”<sup>1</sup> And, in *Hard Times*, the fact

that it was encouraged by his own observation and his journal article “On Strike”, which focused on the Preston Strike,<sup>2</sup> enables the reader to deduct the match between the narrator and the author. Also, what he insists in his essay “Frauds on the Fairies”<sup>3</sup> is very close to the overall message on the importance of sympathy and imagination explored in *Hard Times* too. So, for *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Hard Times*, it is safely said that such relationship can be assumed.

## 2. The People

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the most famous scenes is where commoners gather around the spilled wine casks and have a very merry feast. Here, the flowing wine and the joker’s written letters “BLOOD”<sup>4</sup> also recalls the actual blood to be shed<sup>5</sup> and the “jostling group or crowd”<sup>6</sup> evokes the image of a crazed mob in the revolution. The fever is describes thus; “All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine”<sup>7</sup> and “a shrill sound of laughter and of amused voices — voices of men, women, and children—resounded in the street while this wine game lasted.”<sup>8</sup> The people are pictured as a group that consists of various individuals coming together as one with a shared excitement.

Another scene to look at is where the throng of people heads for the Bastille. “Headlong, mad, and dangerous footsteps to force their way into anybody’s life, footsteps not easily made clean again if once stained red, the footsteps raging in Saint Antoine afar off, as the little circle sat in the dark London window.”<sup>9</sup> In this line, the insanity and menace are emphasized, and the mention on the red blood stain instantly recalls the wine scene. In this chapter, human beings are name-called like “a vast dusky mass of scarecrows”<sup>10</sup>, “the billowy heads”<sup>11</sup>, “a forest of naked arms”<sup>12</sup>, and “all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon”<sup>13</sup>. Here, everyone is treated merely as an instrument in the revolution, not an individual with intellect. Such idea becomes clearer in the repetition of “Jacques”<sup>14</sup> on the next page. Every male is called Jacques, followed by an ID number. Thus, it can be said that the members of the revolution are portrayed as mad, dangerous and dehumanized.

In *Hard Times*, the labourers in Coketown are instantly given a reductive name “The Hands”<sup>15</sup> with capitalized H throughout the entire novel. Not being educated much, they are utilized and treated as tools, not only by the manufacturers but also by an

orator of the labour union. They are mostly young or middle-aged men, and Dickens does not give much variety in the depictions of individual characters of the workers.

In Chapter IV Book the Second, the workers are stirred up easily; “Good! Hear, hear! Hurrah! The eagerness both of attention and intention, exhibited in all the countenances, made them a most impressive sight.”<sup>16</sup> The diction “impressive” here is of course touched by a subtle sense of irony by the author. The workers blindly believe in boastful speeches and they are very collectivistic; but their reckless collectivism in the labour union is shaped by excluding a member (Stephen Blackpool), or in other words, bullying. It can be observed that their bondage is supported by their simplemindedness. However, though their composition may be based on such immature psychology, the group turns out to be a threat to the society.

So, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the commoners are a group with diversity but unite strongly when a desire is shared, and they are fervent, dangerous and described in a form of their body parts that they carry their weapons with. Similarly, in *Hard Times*, the workers are symbolized by their hands, but their portrayals do not include diversity in characters. The Hands are unintelligent, attack another member without much thought, and it is their simple nature that functions as the glue in the labour union. And there is another major common factor in these two novels: Dickens was interested in a group psychology. Aya Yatsugi argues that the radicalized and violent mob in *A Tale of Two Cities* is severely influenced by group psychology<sup>17</sup>, and the same logic passes with *Hard Times* as well. When individuals form a group, they tend to radicalize. And such phenomenon arouses fear in the readers.

### 3. The Demagogue

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Madame Defarge is a tricoteuse at a wine shop, who constantly knits a pattern with the name of those she wishes dead in the revolution. She is “imbued from her childhood with 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”.<sup>18</sup> She leads the mob with fury and drives them as crazily as herself. In fact, there is a tragic background for her vengeance; her sister was raped by an Evrémonde and her father died of grief. However, Dickens shows little sympathy for her. In the end she is killed

by the author; she dies during the fight with Miss Pross.

Madame Defarge, the leader of the revolutionary mob, is also depicted as a future tyrant of the society. In the final scene where Sydney Carton dies, the narrator speaks for his prophecy. "I see Barsad, and Cly, Defarge, The Vengeance, the Juryman, the Judge, long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old."<sup>19</sup>

In *Hard Times*, Slackbridge is the orator of the labour union. Like in many of Dickensian characters, his name gives out his personality. He is a slacker and just a bigmouth. But he certainly has the ability to show off his eloquent but superficial speech, which attracts the labourers to get together. "OH, my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! ... I tell you that the hour is come, when we must rally round one another as One united power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labour of our hands, upon the strength of our sinews, upon the God- created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!"<sup>20</sup>

Slackbridge's utilitarian attitude implies his potential dictatorship both in and out of the labour union in the future. Ignoring Stephen Blackpool's opinion, he proudly declares that "private feeling must yield to the common cause".<sup>21</sup> Dickens has criticized the manufacturers and capitalists for being utilitarian, but here he is also condemning the union leader for the same offence.

And so, Dickens's hate towards the demagogues is apparent and he is concerned about such figures influencing the future society strongly. Both Madame Defarge and Slackbridge's dangerousness and madness arouse the readers' fear; however, they are contrasting in their motives. Madame Defarge is driven by hatred from the bottom of her heart and she is ready for the consequence, whereas Slackbridge is only interested in controlling the masses of labourers with his power and he is utterly irresponsible. But Madame Defarge's violence is to be punished regardless of her backstory, which again demonstrates Dickens's anxiety towards violence, according to Yatsugi.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. The Martyr**

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton, an English lawyer who looks identical to the handsome Charles Darnay, devotes his unrequited love to Lucie Manette. He is an

unhappy man with low self-esteem, drinks to overcome his depression but becomes depressed again. Words like “I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me”<sup>23</sup> or “I shall never be better than I am. I shall sink lower, and be worse”<sup>24</sup> adds the melancholy atmosphere about him, and his such helpless situation evokes sympathy of the readers

Although he considers himself trivial, his role as the martyr and his confessions before his execution displays significant resemblance to the saviour, or Jesus Christ. His prophetic lines like “I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy”<sup>25</sup> and his comment on self-sacrifice (“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known”<sup>26</sup>) are suggestive. And when he finally goes to the guillotine his personal tragedy and the story of revolution overlaps with one another.<sup>27</sup> His melodramatic death was for a better future for all, including his loved one and her family, and the society as a whole.

In *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool is one of the Hands, but he is not exactly one of them. He sticks to his own morals and denies injustice, regardless of what someone else may think of or say to him. He holds that the society is “a muddle” (a phrase often repeated by him throughout the novel), and he also thinks that he is not important at all. He reckons “the sooner [he is] dead the better.” This passive, honest, faithful and compassionate man is in a helpless state. He cannot marry his true love Rachael because he is in wedlock with a drunkard wife, and “let ’em be”<sup>28</sup> is their motto since they cannot change their world. Triggering sympathy of the readers, Dickens seems to imply that it is people in the higher classes who need to help such poor powerless beings.

Also, the character with the lowest social status in the novel is given the morally and spiritually highest position in the whole narrative. Stephen Blackpool resembles Jesus Christ in some ways; as Cunningham has pointed out, the imagery of stars in Bethlehem and his prayer on his deathbed would be some example.<sup>29</sup> Adding to Cunningham’s point, although with clumsy solecism in use, his speech of lament can be considered as almost a preaching or a sermon, too. “The strong hand will never do ’t. Vict’ry and triumph will never do ’t. Agreeing fur to mak one side unnat’rally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat’rally awlus and for ever wrong, will never,

never do 't. Nor yet lettin alone will never do 't."<sup>30</sup> Of course his words are not eloquent like those of Slackbridge's, but his true feelings are in it, which makes it more convincing. And it is commonly said that the ultimate display of his martyrdom is when he dies a tragic death in the end as a victim of false accusation, the pressures from the labour union and the whole "muddle" of the society.

From the above, it can be said that both Sydney Carton and Stephen Blackpool are presented as helpless beings oppressed by others, and they are the very devices for Dickensian sentimentalism, and elicitation of sympathy from the readers must be the purpose of their deployment. And they embody the characteristics of Jesus Christ, and both of them result in sacrificial deaths.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize the above argument, the structurally similar depiction of the people, the demagogues, and the martyrs in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Hard Times* illustrates Dickens's skeptical attitude on the conflicts in the two historical revolutions. The agitated people and the irrational yet powerful demagogues are written in a way they trigger readers' fear towards violence, and sympathy to the helpless but Christ-like martyrs are inevitable while reading the novels. Dickens is not a supporter of radical changes in the social system; rather he promotes moderate changes in peoples' mind in his writings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Monod, Sylvere. "Dickens's Attitudes in A Tale of Two Cities." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24.4, The Charles Dickens Centennial (1970): 491. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Dickens, Charles. "On Strike." *Household Words* VIII (1854): 553. *Dickens Journal Online*. Web. 20 July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, Charles. "Frauds on the Fairies." *Household Words* VIII (1854): 97. *Dickens Journal Online*. Web. 20 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities*., p.32.

<sup>5</sup> From the class résumé no.2 by Asako Nakai

- <sup>6</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities.*, p.31.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.223.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224.
- <sup>15</sup> *Hard Times.*, p.50.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.
- <sup>17</sup> Yatsugi, Aya. "『二都物語』: 孤独な群衆の暴力性." *Dikenzu Bungaku Ni Okeru Bōryoku to Sono Hensō: Seitan Nihiyakunen Kinen* (ディケンズ文学における暴力とその変奏—生誕二百年記念). By Mitsuharu Matsuoka. Ōsaka: Ōsakakyōikutoshō, 2012. 207. Print.
- <sup>18</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities.*, P.375
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.389
- <sup>20</sup> *Hard Times.*, P.109
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114
- <sup>22</sup> Yatsugi., p.209.
- <sup>23</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities.*, 89
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.156.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.389
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.390.
- <sup>27</sup> From the class résumé no.2 by Asako Nakai
- <sup>28</sup> *Hard Times.*, p.52.
- <sup>29</sup> Cunningham, David S. *Reading Is Believing: The Christian Faith through Literature and Film*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002. Print.
- <sup>30</sup> *Hard Times.*, p.119

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