Light and Darkness: Religious Allusions in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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Dickens and Religion

Religion is defined as "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when the universe is believed to have been created by a deity, and usually including ceremonies, prayers, and laws or codes of moral conduct."[1] Religion also offers salvation to the individual and supplies guidance in how to attain it. Of course, salvation differs according to culture and religion.[2] Since the beginning of time, religion has had a primary place in most cultures. It offers the promise to remove guilt so that people can indulge their desires. Making submission seem attractive is a benefit that religion offers to the individual.[3]

The basic narrative of Christianity shows us the process of overcoming guilt through submission. The story of the Garden of Eden demonstrates how uncontrolled desire has sexual and rebellious aspects; thus, it is not possible for desire to remain innocent. As a result, authority is questioned, and the father figure tends to be disobeyed.[4] However, the story of Christ is offered to regain parental approval and to remove guilt. Rather than act on selfish desire, Christ demonstrates a complete giving up of self. The Christian is

1) "Religion." Def. 1. *Webster's Dictionary of American English*. 1997.
2) *Religion in Sociological Perspective* 27.
3) *Dickens and Imagination* 14.
4) Ibid.

able to overcome doubt by overcoming guilty desires.[5]

The religious beliefs of Charles Dickens were intertwined with his life. He felt responsible not only for his children's material future, but also for their spiritual future. Because of this, Dickens wrote the story of Jesus in simple language just for them.[6] He also had a special fondness for children in general. He believed that money should not be used to send missionaries abroad. Instead, he believed the English should be Christianized. The excess money would benefit poor and neglected street children by giving them homes, feeding them, and educating them.[7]

The last sentence of Dickens's will mentions a brief statement about his religion. Sticking to a rather orthodox belief, his will states that he believed Jesus was the Son of God (although he had no idea why that process was not granted to other humans). He believed in an afterlife. This was due to his rejection of total annihilation of body and soul after death and the sudden extinction of all material things on earth. He did not stick to just any one dogma. Concerning the Church of England, the clergymen annoyed him, but he preferred the Church because it was a part of English history, beauty, and literature.[8]

There is not enough here to justify the claim that Dickens was a Christian. But the Church was a national depository of good feeling for Dickens; it allowed for a kind of ancestor-worship, and its creeds began with the Fatherhood of God. Dickens was not concerned much with the doctrines of redemption and grace, and the technique of worship did not concern him at all.[9] Dickens's religion is one of works, not faith. Heaven is more of a compensation than a prize. His characters get their reward by watching the happi-

5) Ibid.
6) *Dickens, His Character, Comedy, and Career* 147.
7) Ibid. 201.
8) Ibid. 332-333.
9) *The Dickens World* 110-111.

ness that they give out.[10]

It is interesting to note that Dickens included quite a few books in his library that did not actually exist. He had wooden spines made and painted to resemble actual books. Some of the religious titles included *Jonah's Account of the Whale; The Books of Moses and Sons, 2 vols.*; and *King Henry the Eighth's Evidences of Christianity.* It was probably very entertaining for Dickens to watch as visitors tried in vain to pull one of these books off the shelf to peruse.[11]

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Christian symbols are "partly parasitical... borrowed for a purpose not purely Christian," and that "what is holy in life is shown in terms of romantic love."[12] Yet Darnay and Carton are both drawn to Lucie mainly because of her Christian principles, not her physical beauty.

Light and Darkness

The French Revolution happened in one of the largest, most powerful countries in the world. At that time, the revolution was "the most frightening, inspiring, threatening, exhilarating, volcanic, horrific, uplifting, unimaginable, portentous, appalling, implausible, imponderable event in the remembered history of the world."[13]

At the time of the revolution and afterward, the English were concerned about the possibility of it happening on their own soil. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, the push for economic and political reform in England became greater, but the upper classes put up a resistance. Sensing that the same thing that happened in Paris could happen in London, Dickens often warned the public that there could be an uprising.[14]

At the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*, some mention is made

10) Ibid.
11) Pearson 180.
12) *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* 204.
13) *Understanding A Tale of Two Cities* 13.
14) Ibid. xii.

of the religious climate in both France and England in the years leading up to the French Revolution. There is an intolerance to popular belief in the supernatural, and the Church and the establishment will stop at nothing to silence any rumors or false claims. Around the same time, Joanna Southcott's prophetic visions were becoming known, and the legend of the Cock-lane ghost in London had been squelched, paving the way for the supernatural craze to begin.[15)]

In the first paragraph of the story, Dickens links opposite words in an effort to explain the contradictions of human nature. This is done to illustrate the paradox of coexistent truths:[16)]

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, ...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...[17)]

Having set the tone with the preceding paragraph, a gloomy, somber darkness envelops the novel. There are pale illuminations and glowing red fires that occasionally appear at certain places in the murkiness, but these just seem to highlight the darkness even more. Even the scenes taking place in daylight don't seem quite "right."[18)] It seems as if the dark void of the universe is winning the battle at this point, as illustrated in this passage from the Bible about the spiritual state of the earth before the coming of the Messiah:

> And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness.[19)]

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15) Wood 373.
16) "Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities," in *The Explicator* 205.
17) TTC i 1. All quotations from Dickens's works are from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Location of material refers to book (small Roman numeral) and chapter (Arabic number).
18) *A Tale of Two Cities* 15.
19) Isa 8: 22. All Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible, King James Version*.

The novel is close to allegorical in that it represents cosmic powers doing battle and carrying out a plan of destiny. After the mention of light and darkness in the first paragraph, two allegorical figures appear: the woodman (fate) and the farmer (death). The woodman's job is to cut down the trees that will be used in making the guillotine, while the farmer sets aside his carts to be used as tumbrels during the revolution. For the rest of the story, the characters and events will play out the symbolism of allegory.[20]

The Four Horsemen

Right before the uprising of the people due to their anger and resentment over the ruling class, Marquis St. Evremonde, a haughty aristocrat with no regard for the lives of commoners, shakes the snuff from his fingers after cursing Monseigneur.[21] This is a direct reference to the words of Jesus when He spoke to his twelve apostles:

> And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet.[22]

One of the most striking symbols in the novel is modeled after an allegory in the New Testament: the four horsemen of the apocalypse.[23] Their duty is to spread destruction and ruin over all the earth. Thus, in the novel, four revolutionaries on horseback take to the land and begin the carnage:

> East, West, North, and South, through the woods, four heavy-treading, unkempt figures crushed the high grass and cracked the branches, striding on cautiously to come together in the court-yard. Four lights broke out there, and moved away in different directions,

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20) Bloom 17.
21) TTC ii 7.
22) Mt 10: 14.
23) Rev 6: 2-8. The four horsemen are described as follows: a rider with a bow on a white horse; a rider with a great sword on a red horse; a rider with a pair of balances on a black horse; and a rider (whose name is Death) on a pale horse.

and all was black again.[24]

After the storming of the Bastille, a mob of citizens starts a series of uprisings. Their desire for retribution and vengeance increases. They forget the goals of the revolution and become just a group of bloodthirsty demons. Much of the mob's destruction is meaningless. They believe they are unstoppable now that they have power. Burning down Evremonde Chateau does not change the problem of poverty and hunger; it only gives a momentary satisfaction, adding more fuel to the fire.

The Guillotine and Redemption

A Tale of Two Cities displays a very basic human need for change. Dickens shows an extreme release from various kinds of confinement with violence to attain this end. General needs in overcoming repression incite violence in the commoners. When the context moves from social to personal, individual characters accept the terms in their own struggles for freedom. As a result of Sydney Carton's self-violence, he is freed from his self-hatred. Carton's fate is unavoidable because of the relationship between physical self-destruction and psychological liberation.[25]

Among the themes in the novel, the greatest seems to be that of sacrifice. The giving of oneself for a greater cause is the way to self-fulfillment. The sacrifice of the Messiah for the sins of humanity in the New Testament is the way that God can redeem the world from the stain of sin. An allusion to this is the character of Carton who, like the Savior in the Bible, gives his life as a sacrifice in the great scheme of destiny. Carton surrenders his life so that the woman he loves, Lucie,[26] can live in happiness with her husband.

The night that Christ is arrested, before His great sacrifice, he

24) TTC ii 23.
25) Bloom 58.
26) Incidentally, her name means "light."

spends time alone in the Garden of Gethsemane.[27] Contemplating and praying about the event at hand, He is strengthened in His resolve to carry out the task. Alluding to this scene, there is a point in the novel when Carton, on his last night of freedom, walks through the courtyard and spends some moments in silence:

> He walked on the other side of it and protected it to the court-yard of the house where the afflicted heart--so happy in the memorable time when he had revealed his own desolate heart to it--outwatched the awful night. He entered the court-yard and remained there for a few moments alone, looking up at the light in the window of her room. Before he went away, he breathed a blessing towards it, and a Farewell.[28]

Lucie embodies the qualities of light, warmth, and spirituality. She is always hovering above the other characters like an angel. Just as she provides the light for Carton in his darkest moments, Lucie hovers above Charles Darnay during his London trial like a "goldenhaired doll" or angel. She is even able to spare Charles from execution as a spy. Lucie also transforms Mr. Lorry from "a mere machine" (a representative of Tellson's bank) into an adopted member of a warm, loving family.[29] In the midst of troubled times, Lucie brings warmth and harmony to everyone around her.

The symbol of the guillotine as blind rage and revenge changes into a symbol of love as Carton draws near. With Carton's sacrifice, the guillotine resembles the cross of Christ. His death becomes an atonement just like that of Jesus. In a world full of evil destinies, Carton's act demonstrates forgiveness[30] for all of the violence in the world. Just like a phoenix born from fire, the terrible crime of the revolution gives birth to sacrifice and redemption: the greatest display of love.[31]

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27) Mt 26: 36-39.
28) TTC iii 12.
29) Hamilton 206.
30) It also demonstrates his own self-forgiveness.

As the Romans in the first century used crucifixion as capital punishment against common criminals,[32] the guillotine becomes the symbol of vengeance and justice for the revolutionaries. Before Carton ascends to the scaffold, the guillotine is a dark symbol of hatred. The fervor among the revolutionaries is so great that the guillotine is described as follows:

> It was the sign of the regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied.[33]

The religion and power of the guillotine actually replace the cross among the people; their allegiance is now to the revolution. They believe it is the only way that redemption and change can be brought into the world. But with Carton's last words,[34] a whole new meaning, that of love, is given to the instrument of terror.

Bloodstains and Wine

A Tale of Two Cities says a lot about fate. One example of this is Madame Defarge, the keeper of a wine shop along with her husband. She secretly knits a register of the names of the revolution's intended victims "with the steadfastness of fate."[35] She is an extremely strong woman who probably still would have been powerful in the world under different circumstances. When she meets her fate at the end of the story, Dickens shows that extreme forcefulness without mercy will only lead to self-destruction.[36] This saying is also mentioned in the New Testament by Jesus when his disciple,

31) *Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness* 266.
32) *The Roman Empire* 24.
33) TTC iii 4.
34) Carton quotes the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." (Jn 11: 25-26)
35) TTC ii 7.
36) Newlin 3.

Peter, is given to a rash act of violence:

> Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.[37]

There is another instance of the fate for those who live by the sword. It is in a sign that Dickens gives at the beginning of the novel to foreshadow the bloody revolution to come:

> Under the guidance of her Christian pastors, [France] entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards.[38]

The confrontation at the end of the novel between Miss Prost and Madame Defarge is shown as a battle between "pitiless French savagery and staunch English humanity."[39] It also represents the struggle between darkness and light, evil and good, the power of hate and the power of love.[40] Miss Prost, of course, wins "with the vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate."[41] Madame Defarge, killed by her own gun during the struggle, demonstrates Dickens's belief that evil will always be paid back with evil.

In the midst of all the moral lessons in the novel is the most basic one. Human conditions will not be improved by revenge, hatred, or violence. When hatred is used to combat hatred, the world will only see more evil. To overcome evil, love alone must be used.

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37) Mt 26: 52.
38) TTC i 1.
39) Bloom 18.
40) Ibid.
41) TTC iii 14.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly described religion and, more specifically, Christianity. The religious beliefs of Charles Dickens and his perception of them were briefly explored. Although there is not sufficient evidence to claim that Dickens was a Christian, his acknowledgement of the Bible and of a higher power in control of the universe greatly influences *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens uses Biblical imagery such as the struggle between light and darkness; reaping what is sown; sacrifice and redemption; and the ultimate victory of love over hatred. The French Revolution casts a shadow over the land as the people rise up to throw off the rule of the aristocracy. Dickens was concerned that a revolution not unlike that in France could easily happen in England, for the cities of Paris and London had much in common: the aristocracy for the most part was in control; the importance of merchant classes was growing; and central districts were spreading and becoming overcrowded by workers and the poor.[42)]

Characters in the novel function as part of the Biblical allegory. Miss Prost and Madame Defarge are destined to meet for their final battle. The Biblical idea of "what goes around comes around" is exemplified in the fate that becomes of Madame Defarge and the eventual end of the self-appointed "citizen tribunals" of the revolution. The end of the allegory culminates with the symbolic transformation of the cross into the guillotine at the start of the revolution, and then it is changed back into the cross with the sacrifice and ultimate victory of Carton. Only love is able to overcome the evils of human nature and society as shown in the novel. The apostle Paul, a former persecutor of Christians before his conversion, eloquently states:

42) Newlin 97.

> And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.[43]

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43) 1 Cor 13: 13.