

Charles Dickens:  
In His Time and In Ours

“We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...” –*A Tale of Two Cities*.

When Charles Dickens penned this famous phrase for his *A Tale of Two Cities*, he aimed to characterize the political and social climate that existed in the European world during the time leading up to the French Revolution. He could not have known at the time that his social ideals and masterful prose would be celebrated into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that his renowned lines would describe not only his times but ours as well. *A Tale of Two Cities* depicts the dangers of class inequality and the value that one can assign to human life, issues that we still debate in today’s political landscape. Readers of this 1869 work are filled with admiration for Dickens’ ability to capture the atmosphere of the French Revolution and for his distinct, satirical yet sensitive writing. Because of its underlying themes and poignancy, *A Tale of Two Cities* clearly represents why Charles Dickens remains a relevant and revered author in today’s society.

While all of Dickens’ works address the horrors of poverty and the complications of class inequality, *A Tale of Two Cities* is one of his most emphatic examples of the dangers of social stratification. In it, he scrutinizes the adverse effect that the great divide between rich and poor has on both English and French societies. In England, “there was a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne” (1) and the legal system’s only answer to crimes committed out of deprivation was death. During this period, the English mob responded to this treatment periodically but with no great conviction; Dickens lucidly presents the small grumblings of the English as a reflection of the rising sea of hatred in France. His description of the extravagant Marquis and his

need for at least “four men, all four ablaze with gorgeous decoration . . . to conduct the happy chocolate to [his] lips” (94) boldly contrasts the image of the poor in the streets of Paris drinking spilled wine off the cobblestones until “not only did it all get taken up, but . . . mud got taken up along with it” (25). Unlike the English monarch, the French king cannot quell the growing resentment and violence. Dickens argues that the French lords bring the hell of the Revolution down upon themselves by abusing the poor, comparing the aristocrat to a “fabled rustic who raised the Devil with infinite pains, and was so terrified at the sight of him that he could ask the Enemy no question, but immediately fled” (217). This animosity towards the nobility simmers in the hearts of the French people until it explodes into “the remorseless sea of turbulently swaying shapes, voices of vengeance, and faces hardened in the furnaces of suffering until the touch of pity could make no mark on them” (204) that storm the Bastille and begin the French Revolution.

While twenty-first century Western society may not be on the edge of the grindstone as French and English societies were in the 1790s, class inequality is an issue that we still talk and write about today. Dickens explicitly imparts his own views on the turmoil existing during his time, reviling the harsh treatment of the poor and the ostentatious detachment of the rich. Today in America, we may not have to be concerned with a brewing revolution, but we should take heed of the lessons of the past and learn from the standards that Dickens presents in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In a culture that is becoming more and more centered around big business and the wealthy elite, Americans must be wary of descending from the ideals of equality represented by and defined in our Declaration of Independence to the stratification that we thrust aside more than two centuries ago. As America’s middle class continues to decrease in percentage, Dickens’

perceptions of the horrors created by the great divide between rich and poor become much more relevant to newer generations of his readers.

Another idea that Dickens contemplates in *A Tale of Two Cities* is the value of a human life. Dickens follows this theme throughout the book, beginning with a recounting of the English government's list of crimes that were equal to one's life: "the forger was put to Death; the utterer of a bad note was put to Death; the unlawful opener of a letter was put to Death; the purloiner of forty shillings and sixpence was put to Death" (47). Dickens derides the French aristocracy's view on the value of a peasant's life with his description of the Marquis' carriage running over and killing a small boy. Afterwards the Marquis displays no remorse; instead he just tosses out "a gold coin for the valet to pick up" (101). Throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, it is apparent that Dickens himself assigns a great value to human life; in the book, he criticizes the hypocrisy and cold-heartedness of those who can feel no compassion for loss of life unless the victim happens to be one of their own. He vividly displays his views on this subject by describing the gruesome hypocrisy of the French revolutionaries through a show of stark opposites: "with an inconsistency as monstrous as anything in this awful nightmare, they had helped the healer, and tended the wounded man with the gentlest solicitude... [and] had then caught up their weapons and plunged anew into a butchery" (252).

How much one human life is worth was not just an issue pondered by Dickens and his contemporaries during the Victorian Era; it is one that we continue to debate around the world today. There still exists a material difference in the value we assign to different people's lives. In Dickens' era, a man's life was valued more than a woman's; an aristocrat's life was worth more than a common worker's. Today, we claim equality

for all people under the law, but our society is full of conspicuous contrasts. Throughout the upper echelons of the business world, the glass ceiling is very much still in existence. Americans continue to degrade and stereotype immigrants from other countries and cultures. Each night on the news, we hear about the twenty Americans that were killed that day in Iraq, but hear nothing about the fifty Iraqis who might also have died. This quandary is not one with an easy solution. Dickens' society struggled with it in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and we continue to struggle with it today. We may no longer deliberate over whether or not a peasant's life is worth more than a gold coin tossed in the mud, but we can still look at Dickens' lucid reasoning to grasp more easily the fickleness of human nature and our tendency to grieve only for our friends.

Charles Dickens is widely remembered for depicting a bleak picture of the flaws of human nature and of our societies. But his social criticism isn't the only thing that makes him a valuable author in the twenty-first century. Dickens also possesses a distinct writing style that transforms his book from a merely didactic work into a masterpiece. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, he wields his pen with more fervor and expertise than the majority of today's writers. While often criticized for his unreasonable coincidences, Dickens manages to craft a remarkable plot with unaffected characters amid his illustrations of the incarnadine turmoil of the revolution. He works well with words and uses metaphors to flesh his novel out. His description of Doctor Manette's voice as something "that affected the senses like a once beautiful colour faded away into a poor weak stain" (35) resonates in one's mind just as the impending footsteps of turmoil echo in the corner that is the Manette household. Many readers struggle with Dickens' writing because of his prolific use of symbolism and figurative language. However what some consider dry and

over-bearing, many come to depend on and eagerly anticipate when they pick up a Dickens novel. “ Blood. The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there” (26) is a prime example of Dickens’ deft symbolism; the above metaphor connects the earlier scene of the people drinking wine off of the muddy streets to the looming gore of revolution.

Charles Dickens was elevated in his time for his insightful look at the flaws of Victorian society and his explosive plots; he is elevated in our time for the ways he addresses themes that are still a part of our society and for his expressive prose. *A Tale of Two Cities* exemplifies his talents in identifying the strengths and failures of mankind and our political machinations through a complicated plot woven into the midst of the horror and rebirth of the French Revolution. Its descriptions of events and characters portray his artistic agility and adeptness at communicating a vivid scene to the reader. No one can dispute Charles Dickens’ talent for exposing societal flaws or his ability to leave a phrase tarrying in your mind long after you’ve closed one of his books. Dickens first seizes our hearts with those lingering phrases yet we continue to give him our regard and admiration because of what he teaches us about ourselves.

““It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I

go to than I have ever known.’ ”-*A Tale of Two Cities*