

Monsters Most Dreadful: Institutions in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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Resurrection, in a variety of forms, arises as a central motif throughout Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Repeatedly, individuals are "recalled to life" by someone who loves them—Lucie Manette brings her father back after he has been "buried alive for eighteen years" (20); she gives testimony that helps save her husband-to-be from almost certain death by the English courts; Sydney Carton gives his life to save Lucie's family, resurrecting them; and, in turn, Lucie's family recalls Carton to life through their memories for years to come. Examples abound of loving individuals who, in recalling and being recalled, create a legacy for themselves and their principles. But what about the powerful institutions that ensnare the lives of all these individuals? What ensures their longevity? Writing the novel in a time of political unrest and fear of revolution in England (just a decade after the European revolutions of 1848), Dickens devotes considerable detail to creating portraits of such institutions as the French aristocracy, the new French Republic, the British and French court systems, and Tellson's Bank. Through these portrayals, he sends a message to his country and to future societies about the fate of such institutions: A group or institution that depersonalizes and does not respect individuals will ultimately die out, while a group that honors such basic human virtues as empathy, love, and compassion will live on. Individual virtues can be quite easily overshadowed by group dynamics, but Dickens makes it clear that love and empathy are so essential to the human spirit that, so long as there are individuals who will stand up for these virtues, no group or society can sustain itself without them.

Through depictions of the revolutionary mob to the monarchy to the court system, Dickens demonstrates how the institutions of the time, in their single-minded pursuit of their own goals, become oblivious to the humanity of the individuals around them. For example, the court system, one of London's oldest and most established institutions, is also one of the most depersonalizing. Early in the novel, Lucie Manette is summoned to court to testify against a man who has done nothing to her but act kindly toward her father. She tries to express this and refers to him as "the gentleman" (72). The court insists that she refer to him as "the prisoner" (72). And when the compassionate and loving Lucie "burst[s] into tears" (73) in fear of sending Darnay to his death, the court responds coldly, telling her she must "give the evidence which it is your duty to give—which you must give—and which you cannot escape from giving" (73). Even less tolerated are the infractions against another entrenched establishment in London, Tellson's Bank. After describing the harsh penalties for petty crimes against the bank, Dickens goes so far as to portray Tellson's as an instrument of death, with images that link it to the soon-to-be-introduced guillotine:

Tellson's, in its day, like greater places of business, its contemporaries, had taken so many lives, that, if the heads laid low before it had been ranged on Temple Bar instead of being privately disposed of, they would probably have excluded what little light the ground floor had, in a rather significant manner. (56)

Working in institutions as depersonalizing as Tellson's can cause individuals who could otherwise be caring and empathetic to act in cold, "businesslike" ways. Mr. Lorry acknowledges at the start of the novel that he is strictly a man of business, and this frequently restrains him from thinking of other individuals or of himself: "we men of business, who serve a House, are not our own masters. We have to think of the House more than ourselves" (84). Stryver, the

proud attorney, speaks openly of the divide between individual goodness and what he must do in service of the court: “If you knew what a conflict goes on in the business mind, when the business mind is divided between good-natured impulse and business” (84).

Possibly the most memorable and terrifying example of individual virtue being stifled by a group mentality is that of the revolutionary mob: “A crowd in those times stopped at nothing, and was a monster most dreadful” (156). As a single-minded body focused on revenge, the mob commits terrible murders, sentences thousands to the guillotine, and tears buildings apart brick by brick—acts that mob members would likely not commit alone. Individuals give in to the vengeful and inhumane motives of the crowd, demonizing the enemy and denying the human connections they inherently share. For example, in one scene, the mob leader Madame Defarge delivers a letter to Lucie from her imprisoned husband. Lucie kisses the hand that delivers the message in a “passionate, loving, thankful, womanly action, but the hand made no response—dropped cold and heavy, and took to its knitting again” (265). Lucie begs Defarge, “as a wife and mother” (267), to take pity on Darnay, but she responds by looking “coldly as ever” (267). Although Defarge originally sought redress for a very personal injustice, her actions have gone far beyond the point where justice has been served. She has given in to the vengeful passions of the mob and further inflamed the mob to carry these passions out in acts. She is blind to Lucie’s humanity.

Dickens shows that, ultimately, people are remembered not for their successes within institutions, but for their enduring impact on fellow human lives. When Mr. Lorry, “the man of business,” reminisces at the novel’s end about his long life, he sadly says he will not be wept for after he dies, because he has “been a man of business, ever since [he was] a man” (308). Sydney Carton (who secretly is also looking back on his life as he nears death) responds by reminding

Lorry that Lucie and her child will weep for him. Lorry makes no mention of Tellson's in this conversation, but rather thinks of his parents and realizes he will be remembered by the few people for whom he was more than a man of business, people he loved as a family. Likewise, as Sydney Carton approaches his own death, he justifies giving his life, not for his business or his country, but for Lucie's family and close friends.

Societal institutions that are dehumanizing cannot outlast individual love and empathy. Only institutions that value human virtue can sustain themselves. The oppressive monarchy failed, and eventually so did the oppressive new republic; the court system changed over time; and Dickens suggests by the words "in its day" (56) that Tellson's also did not last. Although Dickens points out that "vengeance and retribution require a long time" (177) and that things are "not easily purified when once stained red" (218), he implies that, with time, revenge and retribution can die out, and things can be purified. But love and empathy will never die—they allow the individual to rise above the corrupt and impersonal mobs, businesses, and institutions. The final act of the novel is one of love and empathy, when Carton dies by guillotine in place of Darnay. In his few minutes before death, Carton comforts and empathizes with a young seamstress also awaiting execution. As the tumbril takes them to the guillotine and the crowd shouts with anger, "To the guillotine all aristocrats" (369), Carton and the seamstress remain impervious to the mob. Carton tells the seamstress to "Keep your eyes upon me dear child, and mind no other object" (370). The two never part their gaze, demonstrating directly that the strength of two individuals' empathy can overcome an entire mob's anger (the attention of the reader, too, is diverted from the mob to the condemned prisoners). Dickens ends the novel with the carefully wrought final reflections of Sydney Carton. After forecasting that the government and the "long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen out of the destruction of the old" (372)

will “perish,” Carton takes elaborate care to explain what will endure: Lucie and her loving family, and the legacy Carton is leaving behind. From Carton’s prophetic words, the reader catches glimpses of Lucie’s family, who, filled with love and compassion, will live “useful, prosperous and happy” (372) lives, and also of the generations of children who will pass on the story and name of Sydney Carton, a man who sacrificed his life out of love and understanding for another family. In a novel full of death and revenge, Dickens leaves the reader squarely focused on the lives of one compassionate family.

An institution that depersonalizes may be able to kill individuality and human spirit, but ultimately it will kill itself as well. As relevant today as it was 153 years ago, *A Tale of Two Cities* delivers a message to all societies as well as to all individuals. An institution that hopes to succeed must value individual life. Individuals who wish to lead meaningful lives must not lose themselves mindlessly to the goals and purposes of groups and, most important, must retain and cherish their human connection.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. Print.