

*A Model of Integration between Literature, History and Society in
Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities*

نموذج عن الدمج بين الأدب والتاريخ والمجتمع في رواية قصة

مدينتين لتشارلز ديكنز

Fatima Zohra ENNEBATI*

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Abstract:

By 1859, Dickens's historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, was published in serial form in the periodical *All the Year Around*. Dickens's major concern in the novel was historical, revealing the aspects of the French revolution.

Being interested in the social problems of his time, Dickens also included some aspects of the Victorian society. How does *A Tale of Two Cities* integrated between history and literature? How does the novel reveal the evils of the Victorian period? Questions to be dealt with in this paper.

Keywords: historical novel; Victorian literature; French revolution; Victorian society; Charles Dickens.

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تسليط الضوء على رواية قصة مدينتين للكاتب تشارلز ديكنز. نشرت هذه الرواية سنة 1859، كمحاولة من الروائي كشف بعض الأحداث التاريخية المترتبة عن الثورة الفرنسية.

Corresponding author: Fatima Zohra ENNEBATI :taimazora@yahoo.fr

تدور أحداث الرواية في مدينتي لندن و باريس، وقد اهتم الروائي تشارلز ديكنز بتصوير معاناة عصره و المشاكل الاجتماعية التي ميزت الحقبة الفيكتورية. كيف استطاعت هذه الرواية الدمج بين الأدب و التاريخ؟ و كيف عبرت عن شرور العصر الفيكتوري؟ أسئلة سنحاول الإجابة عليها في هذه الورقة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الرواية التاريخية، الأدب الفيكتوري، الثورة الفرنسية، المجتمع الفيكتوري، تشارلز ديكنز.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a novelist, Charles Dickens enriched the Victorian literature with his numerous writings which were written particularly to mirror his utilitarian society. In his novels, he powerfully illuminates the social problems of Victorian England. He ties together his occurrences and the collective ones to reveal the social problems of his time.

Many of his characters, Mrs.Gamp, Mr.Micawber, Dora Copperfield, Pip, Grad grind are so familiar to many readers of literature. His denunciation of the evils of the Victorian age fairly assured his immortality and made him deserve the title of ‘**Conscience of his age**’(Castex and Jumeau, 1994, p161).

In addition to that, he was concerned with other occurrences that took place out of England such as his involvement in writing A Tale of Two Cities a historical novel about the French revolution. Thus, to explore the historical and social concern of the novel, it is essential to shed light on the impact of history and society through the description of the French revolution.

2. The impact of history:

In *Aspects of the novel*, E. M. Forster argues that in a historical novel, the subject is not a historical events, “**but memoirs, associations, passions (which) rise up and cloud the (novelist’s) objectivity**”(Foster, 1974, p36).

If such a description fits to speak about a historical novel, it would certainly be Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* which is an excellent example of the historical novel, a fiction whose setting is in an earlier period in history.

The idea of such kind of novel came to Dickens since the appearance of Carlyle's *the French Revolution* in 1837. For Dickens himself commented that he read Carlyle's history "*five hundred times*" (Allingham, 1991).

Though Dickens does not give trustworthy data about the French Revolution and none of its actual characters exist in *A Tale of Two Cities*, he portrays the panorama of the French Revolution and how did the ancient regime drive France to violent red terror.

The novel begins with a paradoxical description of France and England in the year 1775, "*it was the year of our lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy five*" (Dickens, 1994, p13).

Dickens tries carefully to cover the historical episodes between 1775 and 1793, referring also to other incidents that happened before that time.

By comparing two capitals, two societies, England and France, Dickens integrated history with fiction revealing how history was effective in making a dichotomy between two European countries.

Whereas England was the country of stability as it is illustrated by Lucie's words when she finds her father Dr Manette after his imprisonment in the Bastille for eighteen years, "*we go to England to be at peace and at rest*" (Dickens, 1994, p13).

France however was a scene of violence and oppression imposed by the ancient regime: "*our native France so wicked*"(Ibid).

In England, the king was regarded as the agent of the parliament. By this state, he lost some of his ancient privileges.

Thus, it was the class that grew increasingly important by carrying commerce.

In, France however the feudalism of the Middle Ages was still held and the king was reigning by a divine right. Thus, he was given certain privileges and every one had to obey him.

With his absolute monarchical power, he delegated some privileges to the mass of nobles that surrounded him. Dickens refers to one of these privileges as “*For instance, the privilege of filling up blank forms for the consignment of anyone to the oblivion of a prison for any length of time*” (Dickens, 1994, p32).

These blank forms existed in France and they were called letters the cachet, they were signed by the king and given to the nobles. Anyone who possessed a letter de cachet could fill the name of any person whom he wished to have imprisoned.

In his novel, Dickens gave the example of Dr Manette’s consignment to prison by the aristocratic family the Marquise of Ever monde.

While the king and the nobles were living luxuriously, the poor suffered bitter deprivations. Moreover by the increase of national debts, the peasants who were close to starvation were forced to pay high taxes.

The king *Louis XVI* and leading aristocrats exercised a violent oppression with all its kinds. Hence, the reaction of the oppressed was violent on the scale of the oppressor’s brutally. For this reason, Charles Dickens set for himself the task of showing the devils of that terrible time known as the Reign of terror after nearly a century.

As he clearly revealed his intention in the preface to the novel: “*It has been one of my hopes to add something to the*

popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time”(Allingham, 1991).

The state general was presented by the three estates: *nobles, clergy, _commoners*. However, the privileged persons were the nobles and the clergy but the representatives of the common people were not favoured at all. To give the third estate the appearance of equality, the states general held a meeting in May 1789. But the king reached no decision, the reason why the third estate met secretly and took an oath to provide France with a new constitution. As a result, the three estates sit as one body.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens determines the outbreak of the French revolution by the destruction of the Bastille, thus: *“come, then! Patriots and friends, we are ready! The Bastille”* (Dickens, 1994, p214).

The Bastille is the most famous of Paris prisons and a symbol of tyranny to the people. Thus, inspired by the political philosophers and the success of the American Revolution, the revolutionaries stormed the Bastille in the 14th of July 1789 breaking out the French revolution.

Annoyed by the ancient regime, many members who called themselves the Jacks, were ready to fight and to make an end to that terrible oppression in his novel, Dickens kept the same name Jacques for the alias who was led by monsieur Defarge and who played an effective role in rising up the fire.

During the French revolution, Jacques formed a secret organization called, the **Jacqueries**, which was influential in bringing on the revolution (Herzberg & al, 1940, p267). In the novel the intention was explained by one of the Jacques: *“it is not often that many of these miserable beasts know the taste of wine, or of anything but black bread and death, it is not so, Jacques”*(Dickens, 1994, p41).

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens describes the French Revolution in the second book. In the chapter 21, he gives the description of the assault on the Bastille thus,

Flashing weapons, blazing torches, smoking wagon-loads of wet straw, hard work at neighboring barricades in all directions ... such and such like, the loudly echoing footsteps of saint Antoine escort through the Paris streets in mid-July, one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine” (Dickens, 1994, p215).

In the following chapters, Dickens keeps the illustrations of the French revolution during the months that followed the fall of the Bastille. Such as the murder of some aristocrats portrayed by the execution of Foulon in chapter 22:

‘I swear on my knees, on these stones, to avenge you on foulon! Husbands and brothers, and young men, give us the blood of foulon, give us the head of foulon, give us the heart of foulon, give us the body and soul of foulon’(Dickens, 1994, p222)

After the destruction of the Bastille, a series of street riots complicated the social scene of France and the revolution became inevitable. Fearing the mob anger, the king *Louis XVI* and the royal family moved from Versailles to Paris in October 1789.

After many years of tyranny and oppression, the peasants revolted violently killing their lords and burning castles.

Dickens better exemplified those actions by the burning of the Marquis Château in chapter 23:

‘The château was left to itself to flame and burn...as if it were the face of the cruel Marquis, burning at the stake and contending with fire ...the château burned’(Dickens, 1994, p230)

Those terrific scenes of violence and bloodshed had continued for three years. Losing his power, the king attempted vainly to flee for Varennes in June 1791 by August 1792, the king and the royal family were imprisoned and finally guillotined in 1793.

Dickens followed the event till the end thus:

‘now, breaking the unnatural silence of the whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king’(Dickens, 1994, p270)

After the execution of the king France was declared a republic in 1793 and at last both *ancient regime* and *reign of terror* were abolished. According to Dickens France began a new era of peace and prosperity.

‘the new era began; the king was tried, doomed and beheaded; the republic of liberty, equality, fraternity or death, declared for victory or death against the world in arms; the black flag waved night and day from the great towers of notre dame’(Ibid).

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens draws the image of the French revolution through his imagined characters. The memoirs of Dr Manette in the Bastille added to the memoirs of Madame Defarge witnessing the execution of her family and many others, served him to fulfill his intention.

As Foster point outs: *“a memoir is history, it is based on evidence, a novel is based on evidence + or -, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist”*(Foster, 1974, p55).

Taking Foster’s saying into account, it is quite obvious that a tale of two cities does justice to that momentous phenomenon called the French revolution.

Moreover, *‘with the pure passions ... the dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communing’* (Allingham, 1991), of his imagined characters, Dickens skillfully employed his energies to describe the atrocities committed both by the aristocracy and the peasants.

3. The impact of society:

In the eighteen fifties, Charles Dickens was roughly concerned with the social problems of his time through the use of his novels as a mean to mitigate the complacencies which tended to mistake the Victorian society. The social view of his 1950s contemporaries is highly sustained by many critics and biographers such as Humphary house in the Dickens world who argues that:

“One of the reasons why, in the fifties, his novels begin to show a greater complication of plot than before, is that he was intending to use them as a vehicle for mor concentrated sociological argument.”(Walter, 1991, p171)

Particularly those relating to the misery of the poor, the injustices of law and the oppression of the rich. Hence, his view of Victorian society became harsher because he feared of a massive reaction on the scale of the French revolution.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens focuses increasingly on the danger that may result from the anger of the populace. This view is clearly known in a letter written by Dickens in 1855.

“I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smouldering, instead of blazing openly; that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the first revolution, and is in danger of being turned ... into such a devil of a conflagration as never had been beheld since”. (Allingham, 1991)

Despite in the fact that *A Tale of Two Cities* intends to be a historical novel and was setting between 1775- 1793, Dickens briefly alluded to his own time at the beginning of the novel.

The period was like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.(Dickens, 1994,p13)

As a novelist, Dickens was not much concerned with the physical actions and battles of the French revolution but rather the relationship between history and evil and how violent oppression breeds violent rebellion.

A Tale of Two Cities Embodies the theme that; ***“the human spirit, distorted by systems ... produces distorted societies” (Allingham, 1991).***

Hence, by evaluating the condition of mid-Victorian society, Dickens was imaginatively exploring one of the possible reactions to that confusing condition.

Moreover he regards the position of England in 1850 to be remarkably as France in 1780s. Since both countries experienced the same social upheavals, the injustice of law, the tyranny of prisons, and the bad exploitation of the poor.

However whereas the French people reacted violently through riots and attacks such as the destruction of the Bastille, the execution of many aristocrats and the burning of some buildings as it is mentioned in the novel. The English adopted

some reform movements such as Chartism. Such movements worried many writers such as Carlyle and Dickens who tried to attract the attention to the danger of the populace through the use of such kind of literary masterpiece called “*rhetorical strategies*” to emphasize the severity of the condition of England.

Such a strategy affected the ideas of Victorian people according to the comment of Richard Altick after the end of Chartism in 1848 thus:

Despite predictions of rampant crime and disorder, nothing untoward happened; ‘the people ...proved to be orderly, sober and good-humoured, anything but revolution-minded’(Allingham, 1991)..

The view is illustrated by the contrasts drawn between the two countries in order to affirm the stability of England and reinforced by the English characters in the novel such as Miss Pross when she proudly said:

The short and the long of it is, that I am a subject of his most gracious majesty King George the third ... as such, my maxim is, confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks. On him our hopes we fix, God save the King’(Dickens, 1994,p287).

Almost all the characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* fight against some forms of prison. Prison in the Victorian England became inevitable for the poor who could not pay debts. Thus, despite its insistence on the French revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* reveals some aspects of the Victorian England. About Carton’s role in the novel, the critic Stange remarks that:

“Carton embodies both the novel’s central narrative theme and its profoundest moral view: his past sinful negligence parallels that of eighteenth century Europe; his noble death

demonstrates the possibility of rebirth through love and expiation". (Allingham, 1991),

Thus Carton may reflect the current England and the would be England.

Dickens believed that evil serves good and that humanity evolves through successive stages of destruction and construction. His view is clearly shown in the following passage:

'I see the evil of the time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out'(Dickens, 1994, p366)

As France began a new era by the end of terror and the establishment of the French republic, Dickens was also optimist that the future of England will prosper as he foresees it through Carton's prophecy:

'I see the beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss ... I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more'(Ibid).

A Tale of Two Cities Is the best example to remind the English of a revolution's danger.

It shows that Dickens was convinced that the English people would explode into a murderous mob lest the French revolution was closest the consciousness of Victorians.

Despite Dickens's view of revolution to be as a great symbol of transformation and resurrection, he emphasizes on its violent means. Hence, he clearly presented his view in the final chapter:

'so the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind'(Dickens, 1994, p362).

4. CONCLUSION

Whether Dickens is to be writing about his own day or a remote period, he inevitably selected those details that would make a man or a scene unforgettable. Thus, *A Tale of Two Cities* may be seen as the best example of the historical novel. Moreover, he integrates skillfully between literature society and history.

Being a literary artist, Charles Dickens adopted such literary icon and highly enriched it by his genius and witty. Dickens reacted to both his historical backdrop and his own life's story by using his own novels to point out and criticize the social problems of the day. His novel dominated the Victorian literary scene throughout his life and brought him an everlasting fame.

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