

# UNIT 7 DICKENS'S TREATMENT OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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Let us now focus directly on Dickens's treatment of the French Revolution. The first striking thing in Dickens's account is that unlike Burke, he draws our attention to the oppressiveness of the aristocracy and indeed holds them primarily responsible for precipitating the upheaval. But Dickens's attitude to the revolution is not sympathetic either – he associates it with bloodshed, revengefulness and the propensity for indiscriminate levelling. We shall see, however, that Dickens's treatment of the revolutionaries and especially of Mme. Defarge is more complex, containing as it does, a real element of admiration together with fear and loathing. We hope that after you have gone through this Unit you will be in a position to tackle what is self-evidently one of the most important topics in the study of *A Tale of Two Cities*: Dickens's treatment of the French Revolution in the novel.

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## 7.1 THE ARISTOCRACY AND THE POOR IN A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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We might begin our discussion of Dickens and the French Revolution by quoting a sentence from one of Dickens's letters. "If there is anything certain on earth", Dickens wrote to his friend Forster "I take it, it is that the condition of the French peasantry generally at the day [during the time of the French Revolution] was intolerable". Although the peasantry never directly enters the world of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens draws our attention to the terrible situation of the French urban poor. Here is a description of St. Antoine :

Hunger – was prevalent everywhere. Hunger was pushed out of the tall houses, in the wretched clothing that hung upon lines. Hunger was patched into them with straw and rag and wood; Hunger was repeated in every fragment of the small modicum of firewood that the man sawed off; Hunger – stared from the filthy street that had no offal among its refuse of anything to eat. (Book I, Chapter 5)

What is more the suffering of the poor in *A Tale of Two Cities* is directly related to the exploitativeness of the aristocracy.

Thus while the inhabitants of St. Antoine fight with each other to lap up the red wine spilt on the street, one of the great lords in power at the court drinks his evening chocolate with the help of four men "all ablaze with gorgeous decoration". The luxurious lifestyle of the noble lords is not just contrasted against the miseries of the poor, it is also shown to be sustained directly by exploitation. As a state dignitary, Dickens tells us, the Monsieigneur had one noble idea on the art of governance which was to "tend to his own pocket and power".

Aristocratic oppression in *A Tale of Two Cities* directly fuels revolutionary fires, and may, in fact, be said to actually create revolutionaries. Thus it is the contempt and arrogance with which Monsieigneur Evremonde treats the parents of the child whose death he has caused, that sparks off the first act of revolutionary violence. Even more significant is the Monsieigneur's other crime revealed late in the novel. The Monsieigneur's rape of Mme. Defarge's sister does not just signify the oppression of the poor by the aristocracy. It also creates in Mme. Defarge that implacable hatred of the aristocracy that emerges as one of the most frightening aspects of the revolutionary consciousness.

The reckless exploitativeness of the aristocracy, the terrible condition of the poor makes the revolution almost inevitable. In *A Tale of Two Cities* this inevitability is suggested in many ways, by direct commentary, by the imagery and especially by Mme. Defarge's symbolic knitting, which anticipates the revolution with "the steadfastness of fate".

## 7.2 DICKENS'S REPRESENTATION OF THE REVOLUTION

Despite recognizing its inevitability and the aristocracy's responsibility in precipitating it, Dickens does not justify the revolution, far less sympathize with it. On the contrary, Dickens conceptualizes the events culminating in the revolution almost entirely in Carlylean terms. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, as in Carlyle's work the revolution is above all a *reaction* to aristocratic oppression; the terrible crop that grows out of the seed that the aristocracy have sown, and as such incorporates the worst features of what it seeks to overthrow. As Dickens puts it in the last chapter of the novel:

Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious licence and oppression once again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind. (BK. III. Ch. 18)

In *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens uses a whole range of techniques to paint the revolution in the most lurid of colours. At the most familiar level he draws on the blood-drinking, devouring imagery that informs so much of the nineteenth century English writing on the French Revolution, from the conservative pamphlets and newspapers to Carlyle's better-known account. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the blood-wine imagery is introduced somewhat ambiguously. When the impoverished inhabitants of St. Antoine rush to lap up the red wine spilt on the streets, we respond above all to their poverty and when a "tall joker", dips his finger in the red wine and scrawls the word "Blood" on a nearby wall we assume that a justifiable connection is being made between an oppressed people and a bloody revolution. On the other hand, however, the new connotation that wine acquires already implicates the people in the act of blood drinking, and when Dickens speaks of "the tigerish smear about the mouth" of one of the revellers it becomes impossible to separate the notion of the revolutionary masses from the idea of cannibalism.

As the novel progresses, the blood imagery is systematically delinked from its more positive connotations, such as liberation, sacrifice or the idea that revolution is a justifiable response to oppression, and associated more and more with predatoriness. In Dickens's direct descriptions of the events in France, blood becomes the staple diet of La Guillotine :

Lovely girls, bright women, brown haired, dark haired and grey youths; stalwart men and old; gentleborn and peasant born; all red wine for La Guillotine, all daily brought into light from dark cellars of loathsome prisons, and carried to her through the streets, to slake her devouring thirst. (Bk III, Ch.5)

This conception of the revolution as nothing more than a protracted orgy of bloodletting, provides Dickens with the justification of projecting the revolution not as a sequence of real events but as a nightmare. In the scene in which the men and women come to the grindstone to sharpen their weapons, Dickens is interested not in leaving behind for posterity a description of life in Paris during the revolutionary times, as in orchestrating images that create a sense of hell on earth :

The grindstone had a double handle, and turning at it madly were two men, whose faces, as their long hair flapped back when the whirling of the grindstone brought their faces up, were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages in the most barbarous disguise – As these ruffians turned and turned – some women held wine to their mouths that they might drink; and what with dropping blood, and what with dropping wine, and what with them stream of sparks struck out of the stones, all the wicked atmosphere seemed gore and fire. (Book III. Ch. 2)

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, as in so much of the conservative writing on the French Revolution, the events of the 1790s are associated not just with blood and gore but also with the complete breakdown of order, both civic and natural. The idea that the revolutionary legislators were in "a violent haste" to pull everything down was of course at the heart of Burke's idea of the revolution. In *A Tale of Two Cities* this breakdown of "order" is manifest in the functioning of the revolutionary courts. Dickens describes the jury that tries Darnay as follows :

Looking at the jury and the turbulent audience, he might have thought that the

usual order of things was eversed, and that the felons were trying the honest men. (Book III)

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the jury precipitates the most "unnatural" of situations where the testimony of Darnay's own father-in-law becomes the means of condemning him.

The idea of "unnaturalness" in fact underlies a great deal of what Dickens has to say about the French Revolution. It is manifest in Dickens's frequent references to the drought conditions which is in fact seen by historians as one of the *causes* of the revolution but which Dickens insinuates as one of its *effects*, in the macabre jokes that grow around the guillotine, but above all in a blurring of gender distinctions which the French Revolution seems to have brought about. Almost all the conservative writers on the French Revolution had reacted with horror at the "desexualizing" of women during the revolution. Burke had written with loathing about the unnatural acts of women "lost to all shame", and Carlyle of the violent speech and gestures, of the "manly women" from whose girdle "pistols are seen sticking". In *A Tale of Two Cities* the embodiment of this kind of "unnatural" woman is of course Mme. Defarge, but as we shall see, Dickens's treatment of the revolutionaries and especially of Mme. Defarge is more complex than his treatment of the revolution.

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### 7.3 THE REVOLUTIONARIES IN A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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On the face of it Dickens's treatment of the revolutionaries is consistent with his treatment of the revolution. The revolutionaries are, in fact, seen as part of the drought-stricken post-Revolution landscape – their upraised arms are compared at one point to "shrivelled branches of trees in a winter wind". This is one of the many instances when Dickens dramatizes the poverty of the revolutionary masses not in order to evoke our sympathy but in order to associate Mme. Defarge and her comrades, as well as their enterprise with a sense of unhealthiness. For Dickens as for many of his middle class contemporaries, the most frightening feature of a revolution based on deprivation is its propensity to destroy rather than build :

The raggedest nightcap, awry on the wretchedest head, had this crooked significance in it : I know how hard it has grown for me, the wearer of this to support life in myself ; do you know how easy it has grown for me the wearer of this to betray life in you? Every lean bear arm that had been without work before, had this work always ready for it now, that it could strike. (Bk. II Ch. 22)

In these circumstances it is not surprising at all that Dickens sees the revolutionaries as "dark, revengeful and repressed", and that he sees the revolution leading directly to the reign of terror.

Yet lurking behind this obvious dislike for the revolutionaries is a very real, if somewhat frightened admiration. The men and women who gather at the Defarge wine shop are committed to their cause, and confident about their ultimate success; and there is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that the Defarges are not just outstanding organizers but also capable of surviving the onslaughts of a hostile administration.

The most striking figure among the revolutionaries is of course Mme. Defarge. Quite apart from her personal qualities which we will discuss later, what makes Dickens's portrayal of Mme. Defarge so remarkable, is that it is not imprisoned within the prejudices that had determined the portrayal of the non-domestic women in the writing of Burke and Carlyle. Thus far from being cast in the Burkean/Carlylean mould of the violent, "mad" revolutionary woman, Mme. Defarge is characterized by her calm determination, her razor sharp powers of observation and her complete dedication. In this sense Mme. Defarge's refusal to stay within the bounds of domesticity suggests not her revolutionary perversity but her independence.

Mme. Defarge has been compared to Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. But unlike Lady Macbeth, her role is never confined to that of a mere instigator or advisor. On the contrary, she is an equal and even dominant partner in the revolutionary enterprise; always capable of overruling her husband at public forums. What sustains Mme. Defarge's independence is her outstanding leadership qualities. As we saw in Unit 4, nothing that has a bearing on the revolution escapes her, and she moves about in St. Antoine like a "missionary", channelizing the discontentment of its miserable folk for the cause of the revolution. With his deep antipathy to the revolution, Dickens hates Mme. Defarge for her very strengths. He sees in her unwavering dedication to the revolution the propensity to sacrifice all human considerations for an abstract cause, and in her determination a cold

pitilessness. But the truly remarkable thing is that despite hating her Dickens is still able to pay Mme. Defarge a tribute such as the following :

Of strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty that not only seems to possess to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike in others an instinctive recognition of those qualities. (Bk III, Ch. 14)

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## 7.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have seen in what respects Dickens's treatment of the French Revolution differs from that of Burke and Carlyle whose views we discussed in Unit-6. We have seen that while Dickens holds the aristocracy responsible for precipitating the Revolution, he is not sympathetic to the revolutionaries either. He depicts them in diabolical terms associating them with indiscriminate bloodshed and vengeance. Dickens's treatment of Mme Dearge, however, is more complex as he treats her with fear and hatred as well as with admiration.

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## 7.5 GLOSSARY

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<b>propensity</b>	natural tendency towards a particular (usually undesirable) kind of behaviour
<b>implacable</b>	which cannot be satisfied
<b>perversity</b>	unreasonable opposition to the wishes of others; difference from what is right or reasonable.