

# Bridges to Heaven and Hell : On the Interrelationship of Ethics and Artifice in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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## Abstract

This paper examines Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, specifically focusing on how Dickens uses both Christian and implicitly nonreligious imagery to set up a metaphorical opposition of ethical domains. While at first glance the title of the story would seem to refer to London and Paris, in fact Dickens goes to great lengths to problematize this oversimplistic dichotomy through subtle details of depiction. Although this initial surface-level interpretation of the title is never completely eliminated, a surreptitious counterpart interpretation eventually supersedes it, making the title seem richer and more ambiguous in retrospect. By setting up oppositions between the Christian cross and the Republic's guillotine, between Sydney Carton's willingness to sacrifice himself and Madame Defarge's unrelenting obsession with vengeance, and between the "bridge of light" mercifully extended to Carton at the story's end and the stormed drawbridges of the Bastille, Dickens has painstakingly instantiated details relating to two warring municipalities, the City of God and the City of Man, for which opposition is not a passing detail of historical concern but a question of fundamental moral orientation.

Keywords: *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens, bridge, heaven, hell, Sydney Carton, Madame Defarge, William Blake, "London," flood

## 1 . Introduction

Charles Dickens, through the great body of his work, developed a well-deserved

reputation for complex characterization and nuanced depiction. Despite the fact that his plots occasionally sink into *bathos*, these effusions are usually transitory and critics have been quick to forgive this perceived weakness in light of equally obvious strengths. Dickens stories normally display ample irony and furthermore Dickens tends to problematize his themes sufficiently to overcome potential critical judgments of oversimplification. Having said this, if all of Dickens's novels had met with the sort of responses garnered by *A Tale of Two Cities*, his relatively firm status as a literary author might not have solidified in quite the way that it has.

This paper will examine the artifice employed by Dickens in the work but, more importantly, it will also explore the reasons he felt compelled to take the stylistic risks he did. For in the end, while stylistic choices may be evaluated individually, it is more revealing to assess a work's artifice while keeping in mind the ways in which that artifice functions in the narrative: how do the individual decisions contribute to the coherent whole? In particular, broadly coherent metaphorical depiction and recurrent images will be analyzed.

Concerning Dickens's use of such metaphor and images generally, Robert Alter states:

Figurative language thus deployed becomes an instrument of discovery, and the very notion that metaphor is background and narration is foreground is called into question, for what happens in the novel, thematically, perceptually, philosophically, may occur as much through the spinning out of metaphor as in what one character does or says to another. Metaphor as a primary vehicle for novelistic imagination is what one sees again and again in Dickens, and perhaps with growing force in the later novels. (*Imaginary*, 68-69)

If Alter is correct, analysis may show that the metaphors and images found in *A Tale of Two Cities* work not locally but in concert. Such coherence may be analyzed within the story's greater context to reveal aspects of Dickens's overall stylistic

strategy, or figuratively instantiated ideological viewpoints, or both. Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to give an overview of the work as a whole.

## 2 . A Summary of *A Tale of Two Cities*

At the most basic level, *A Tale of Two Cities* seems to tell the story of Charles Darnay, specifically detailing how this mysterious man of French origin is nearly executed first in England and then in France, both times being saved due to the actions of the story's secondary but somehow more central protagonist, Sydney Carton. Indeed, this 'throwaway' character, who would only have played a bit part in one of Dickens's other stories, is destined to take center stage. In England, Darnay escapes being drawn and quartered because Carton, who greatly resembles him, makes an appearance at the trial causing the jurors to question whether the right man had been charged with the crime of treason. While Darnay is released, neither his guilt nor his innocence are ever firmly established. Later on in France, Carton voluntarily takes Darnay's place when he is sent to the guillotine by French revolutionaries who find him guilty of possessing aristocratic lineage. In the second case, because Darnay had fled France to escape the guilt of his family's mistreatment of their subjects, he was indeed guilty of the "crime," at least by the standards of the revolution.

The plot is complicated, however, by the fact that Darnay has married Lucie, the daughter of Dr. Manette, a former prisoner of the Bastille. When Darnay returns to France from England in the midst of the revolution to help a former servant who is in trouble, he is identified and captured, leading his wife, young daughter, and father-in-law to travel secretly to Paris in an attempt to help him. Dr. Manette, now a hero due to his long and unjust imprisonment, succeeds once in securing his release from the mob-run court but Madame Defarge, whose close relatives had been killed by none other than Darnay's uncle, the Marquis St. Evrémonte, uses her considerable influence to bring him to trial again, this time without hope of avoiding the guillotine.

It is at this point that Carton intervenes a second time. Desiring to show his gratitude to Lucie for her previous kindness to him, he secretly enters the prison and trades places with his look-alike Darnay, sending him on his way back to London with his family. As Carton goes to the guillotine, the narrator hints that heaven awaits him. Madame Defarge, meanwhile, has been killed by her own gun in her struggle with Miss Pross, who does all that she could and more than she had planned to protect Lucie's family from further misfortune.

### **3 . Oppositions Evident in the Depiction of *A Tale of Two Cities***

Alter has mentioned how Dickens often places "elaborate descriptive set pieces" in the "beginnings of chapters and books" resulting in much "densely interwoven unity of recurring image and theme" (*Imagined*, 48). *A Tale of Two Cities* would appear to be just such an example. Dickens's novel begins with the famous first line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (*Tale*, 1). Directly following this, a series of dichotomous superlatives ensue, these being wisdom-foolishness, belief-incredulity, Light-Darkness, hope-despair, everything-nothing, and Heaven-"the other way." It should be evident that a careful author like Dickens would be unlikely to begin a book with such a barrage of opposites unless he had planned to exploit it somehow. The actual effect of this antonymous preamble with respect to the text as a whole, however, can only be understood in retrospect.

Orwell has noted that "Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral" (Orwell, 416) and that the fact that he "is always preaching a sermon" is "the final secret of his inventiveness" (Orwell, 457). As the introduction does have a distinctly ethical tone to it, the reader may initially be tempted to understand the title, *A Tale of Two Cities*, as a xenophobic intimation of the moral superiority of London to Paris. As will be detailed later, however, Dickens's critical depictions of London, in particular, will show such a simplistic appraisal to be incorrect.

While Alter notes the ethical quality in the opposites chosen by Dickens, he also detects a touch of irony in the passage that might cause a sensitive reader to withhold judgment:

The capitalization of Light and Darkness, perhaps an ironic allusion to the allegorical use of such capitalized nouns in eighteenth-century English poetry, is very much to the point of the whole novel, which one could say is really "about" Light and Darkness (though chiefly the latter) in all their traditional symbolic associations. (*Demons*, 15)

Certainly, Dickens's capitalization of the words light and darkness is provocative and may well tempt the reader to understand the introductory passage in terms of irony. Even readers who approach the novel without any prior knowledge of it or its critical reception are likely to have some knowledge of Dickens's other works; such background information, in particular an understanding of Dickens's cynical but pragmatic social outlook, would likely encourage the reader (and especially the modern reader) to interpret the capitalization of "Light" and "Darkness" as oversimplistic hyperbole or perhaps as an unjustified dichotomy which has been instantiated solely to be undermined over the remainder of the text. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate the ways in which Dickens does indeed undercut certain aspects of this dichotomy while nevertheless keeping other aspects of it in reserve only to revive them at the end of the book.

### **The Cross and "La Guillotine"**

One prominent dichotomy in the story is that between the Christian cross and the guillotine, the symbol of the French revolution. Orwell has noted that "[t]he whole book is dominated by the guillotine" (Orwell, 420-421) and Dickens certainly emphasizes the practical results of its activity. But aside from its prominent role as a primary motivating force for the actions of protagonist and antagonist alike, it

occasionally becomes the subject of Dickens's depiction, as well. In one passage, Dickens musters his eloquence to vividly characterize this peculiar method of execution and provide some historical background:

Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world—the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine.

It was the popular theme for jests; it was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented the hair from turning grey, it imparted a peculiar delicacy to the complexion, it was the National Razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack. 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.  
( *Tale*, 336 )

In this predominately humorous passage, a great variety of vivid illustrations are ventured but, through the repetition of the capitalized word "Cross," opposed to the capitalized phrase "La Guillotine," the idea of the guillotine as both the "regenerative" replacement for—but also the iconic antithesis to—the cross is foregrounded. It goes without saying that the reader will almost automatically associate the cross with the Christian religion and with God. Perhaps not surprisingly, Dickens is quick to establish the guillotine's corresponding association with the "Devil":

It sheared off heads so many, that it, and the ground it most polluted, were a rotten red. It was taken to pieces, like a toy-puzzle for a young Devil, and was put together again when the occasion wanted it. It hushed the eloquent, struck down the powerful, abolished the beautiful and good. ( *Tale*, 336 )

This passage also serves to portray the guillotine as a force that aligns itself against the “powerful” (of course) but also the “eloquent,” the “beautiful,” and (most revealingly) the “good.” Is Dickens here referring to beautiful and good people who are unluckily executed or intimating that the very ideas of “beauty” and “goodness” were fundamentally incompatible with the indiscriminate judgments rendered by the guillotine? Whatever the case, in the course of a single paragraph, Dickens has gone from joking about the device to characterizing the revolutionary effort generally as a diabolical scheme by depicting its instrument of justice in negative and mostly anti-Christian terms.

Of course, the Christian cross has already made a less obtrusive appearance in the narrative. In an earlier depiction, just before the Marquis St. Evrémont's assassination, the cross is portrayed as an object sacred not to Evrémont but to the poor peasants he is oppressing:

At the steepest point of the hill there was a little burial-ground, with a Cross and a new large figure of Our Saviour on it; it was a poor figure in wood, done by some inexperienced rustic carver, but he had studied the figure from the life his own life, maybe for it was dreadfully spare and thin.

To this distressful emblem of a great distress that had long been growing worse, and was not at its worst, a woman was kneeling. She turned her head as the carriage came up to her, rose quickly, and presented herself at the carriage-door. (*Tale*, 138)

In this revealing passage, the negative portrayal of the guillotine finds its exact opposite. No less a means of execution, the cross is not depicted as a ludicrous object to be joked about but rather as a sober icon to encourage humble contemplation. It's “rustic” and “poor” appearance are said to be one with the figure portrayed thereupon. More importantly, while the insatiable and indiscriminately destructive nature of the guillotine has been portrayed in the abstract, the cross is shown precisely with

the afflicted Christ transposed upon it. As such, the woman's subsequent entreaty for justice to the Marquis is depicted as an entreaty coming, if indirectly, from God.

Marcus has remarked that "[r]eligious feeling at its best now functions as a basis for human community, a way in which men can reach beyond themselves"; he then goes on to note how, because the dance of the Carmagnole by the French revolutionaries "is another form of community," the Cross can at times "be transformed into the guillotine" (Marcus, 29). As the previous analysis indicates, however, in Dickens's formulation, the cross is not "transformed into" the guillotine but is "superseded" (*Tale*, 138) by and replaced by the guillotine. This is not a subtle distinction. Marcus's interpretation of Dickens's dichotomy posits a continuum of human social belief, and a rather unprincipled one, at that. As he equates the cross with the guillotine and average Christians with the revolutionaries dancing the Carmagnole, he asserts that popular religious belief is the very fountainhead of the surging desire for vengeance which result in mob-rule. On the contrary, though, the remainder of Dickens's depiction reveals this interpretation to be flawed. Details of depiction (e.g. when the narrator mentions the lack of faith in 'reign of terror' Paris; *Tale*, 388) tend to show the Christian and revolutionary cross-sections of society as two more or less separate elements. While the irreligious Madame Defarge is thoroughly demonized through Dickens's depiction, the humble peasant Christians depicted are dissociated from the revolution's excesses. In no way was Dickens's story a broad critique of organized religion.

On the contrary, the work impeaches not the Christian instinct for mercy but rather revolutionary blood-lust. Orwell correctly notes that "[r]evolution as [Dickens] sees it is merely a monster that is begotten by tyranny and always ends by devouring its own instruments" (Orwell, 422). Chesterton touches upon the caricature of events resulting from Dickens's philosophical stance when he comments, "[b]oth [Carlyle and Dickens] tend too much to represent [the French Revolution] as a mere elemental outbreak of hunger or vengeance; they do not see enough that it was

a war for intellectual principles, even for intellectual platitudes” (Chesterton, 180). Of course, to see the French revolutionaries as justified in rising up against the aristocracy in no way requires approving of their methods. Brookhiser sides with Dickens against Chesterton in this historical dispute, criticizing Dickens’s biographer’s “pie-in-the-sky view of the French revolution,” calling it one of his “numerous mental ties” (Brookhiser, 130). It becomes apparent that one’s view of the guillotine will be inextricably bound up with one’s opinions concerning both the aims and the accomplishments of the French Revolution; sympathy for either may preclude a full-throated affirmation of what Dickens was attempting to express in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

### **Blake’s Tiger and Dickens’s Depiction of Amoral**

Oliver Tearle has asserted that there can be little doubt that Dickens was aware of the works of poet and social critic William Blake (Tearle, 335). Specifically, he has pointed out Dickens’s allusion to Blake’s poem “London,” which I will mention in detail later in this paper. It is likely that Blake’s influence does not stop with “London,” however. In fact, there is limited evidence of allusion to another well-known work from Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, as well.

The Marquis St. Evrémonde is one of the novel’s most stylized characters. Beyond simply serving as Darnay’s wicked uncle, he is the only member of the French nobility given a detailed portrayal and thus is used by Dickens to personify all that is complacent, corrupt, and overconfident about the French aristocracy as a whole. In one passage, Dickens depicts him as a shape-shifting tiger:

The valet come and gone, Monsieur the Marquis walked to and fro in his loose chamber-robe, to prepare himself gently for sleep, that hot still night. Rustling about the room, his softly-slippered feet making no noise on the floor, he moved like a refined tiger: looked like some enchanted marquis of the impenitently wicked sort, in story,

whose periodical change into tiger form was either just going off, or just coming on. ( *Tale*, 150 )

The most concrete aspect of the extended simile is the comparison of the soundless physical movement of the Marquis about the room with the stealth of a jungle predator. The rest of the analogy seems to vaguely recall Blake's characterization of "The Tyger" ( "The Tyger," 14 ) as an amoral instrument of destruction, awesome in its finely honed ferocity. Certainly, Dickens's negative portrayal of tigers will only be understood in light of some literary or cultural reference not specified in the text itself. On the other hand, the Marquis does not "burn bright" or inspire awe in the way that the ferocious subject of Blake's poem "The Tyger" does; the only thing he inspires is contempt. Through consistently negative portrayal, Dickens has subtly but unerringly ensured that the reader will not harbor any positive feelings for Evrémonte. By this episode in the story, the reader will already understand that if the Marquis is or ever was a tiger in any way, he is now an effete and lazy one. When the assassin creeps into his chamber and kills him, the reader is likely to feel that justice has been served, no less because he was a bad man than because he was a substandard tiger.

Dickens does not let this allusion to Blake's famous poem rest with Evrémonte's death, however; another "tiger" quickly takes his place in the narrative in the person of Madame Defarge. Like the Marquis, she is a cool and calculating predator ( *Tale*, 215 ) but she is hungrier and so when the time comes to pounce she is much more ferocious. In a revealing conversation with her husband, this ruthlessness is brought to the forefront and then followed directly by Madame Defarge's urging for Defarge as well to become a "tiger" and a "devil":

"Hold!" cried Defarge, reddening a little as if he felt charged with cowardice; "I too, my dear, will stop at nothing."

“Yes! But it is your weakness that you sometimes need to see your victim and your opportunity, to sustain you. Sustain yourself without that. When the time comes, let loose a tiger and a devil; but wait for the time with the tiger and the devil chained not shown yet always ready.” ( *Tale*, 216-217 )

Clearly, Dickens has used the “tiger” characterization to equate Evrémonde and Madame Defarge in moral terms. It is also evident that he considers Madame Defarge superior, at least by “law of the jungle” standards. While this replacement of one predator with another is ethically neutral in Darwinian terms, in Christian ethical terms both human predators may be held to account. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the story’s greater context, the tiger has now been directly associated with the “devil,” and this through a statement made by Madame Defarge herself.

Concerning the work as a whole, Orwell has remarked, “[ t ]here is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it *were* overthrown” (Orwell, 416 ). The ways in which Dickens has characterized both the Marquis St. Evrémonde and Madame Defarge in terms of Blake’s amoral tiger confirms this. For Dickens, aristocracy represents the abuse of humans by other humans; mob rule does not overturn this power relationship, it merely reverses the direction of the abuse.

### **Drawbridges and the Storming of the Bastille**

Monod has noted that Dickens’s depiction of the storming of the Bastille is stylistically idiosyncratic. Dickens uses “conspicuously verbless sentences” to “juxtapose brief separate vignettes” achieving an effect that can only be called, in retrospect, “cinematographic” ( Monod, 183-184 ). Describing the siege, Dickens writes:

Deep ditches, double drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke. Through the fire and through the smoke in the fire and in the

smoke, for the sea cast him up against a cannon, and on the instant he became a cannonier Defarge of the wine-shop worked like a manful soldier, Two fierce hours.  
( *Tale*, 263 )

This hectic scene emphasizes the fire and smoke present at the Bastille no less than three times in the space of two sentences. Of course in war time, fire and smoke are a typical part of the battlefield and so might be deemed an unremarkable detail in such a depiction. Nevertheless, Alter has noted how the “four incendiaries” are subsequently sent by Dickens to sow destruction throughout France and thereby “become the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” ( *Demons*, 18 ). And when these messengers of destruction ride forth, they overcome similar obstacles to those already portrayed in the storming of the Bastille: “stockades, guard-houses, gates, trenches, and drawbridges” ( *Tale*, 281 ). Furthermore, these figures were “stopped by no obstacle, tending to centres all over France” ( *Tale*, 281 ). As the fires of the revolution spread outward from the Bastille to other “centres,” the legendary prison seems less an emblem of the former prisoners now freed than of the former aristocrats now imprisoned. The cruelty of the prison has not been abolished but rather expanded to encompass all of France; in the terminology of Dante’s *Inferno*, it has become the most central of the “Circles of Hell.” Precisely because it is not a palace that Defarge and the others storm in Dickens’s depiction but a prison, when the drawbridges and walls of the Bastille are overcome, the conquerors gain not power in general but only the restricted ability to replace the previous torturers with their own numbers. The author seems to be implying that revolutionaries become torturers to the extent that their revolution succeeds.

In retrospect, it may be said that Dickens has carefully prepared the way for the Bastille to be understood as the most exact localization of Hell in the story. The first mention of the Bastille is in relation to Dr. Manette, who, while being accompanied away from Defarge’s wine shop as he began his journey to England, mistakenly

believes that he is still imprisoned: "On their reaching the courtyard he instinctively altered his tread, as being in expectation of a drawbridge; and when there was no drawbridge, and he saw the carriage waiting in the open street, he dropped his daughter's hand and clasped his head again" (*Tale*, 57). Although Dr. Manette has at least physically escaped from his hellish experience in the Bastille, his failure to notice the drawbridge in this scene points vividly to the fact that his punishment has, in fact, gone with him and he has yet to truly cross over from the territory of his afflictions.

While Dickens's depiction of hell is found both at the physical center of the revolutionary storm and in the hearts of all those associated with the Bastille, heaven's depiction is localized somewhat differently. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, heaven is not found in any specific earthly location but in the hearts of individuals and, additionally, in the heaven of Christian tradition, the place of eternal reward outside of time where Christian believers enter into the presence of God.

In one of the final scenes, Carton traverses spiritually vacuous terrain filled with religious icons but no actual belief: he passes "towers of the churches, where no prayers were said" (*Tale*, 388) and walks the streets "which had become so common and material, that no sorrowful story of a haunting Spirit ever arose among the people out of all the working of the Guillotine." Finally, with the city "settling down to its short nightly pause" from the revolution, "Sydney Carton crossed the Seine again for the lighter streets" (*Tale*, 388). In this scene, we note that Paris, as hell, is depicted in terms of a multitude of furious inhabitants, all seemingly complicit in the horrors of the time, while Sydney Carton, peaceful and unobserved, crosses the Seine "for the lighter streets." As depicted, the Seine crossing represents a decision. Faced with the choice of saving Darnay by freely giving up his own life or simply walking away, Carton crosses the bridge toward his death. While the entire population of Paris seems to be following an amoral trajectory concerned only with vengeance, the spiritual inclination of Carton's heart toward self-sacrifice and mercy as he crosses

the bridge allows him to continue on in the direction of “lighter streets,” that is, the streets of heaven in which no darkness is found.

Soon after, on the bridge of his decision, he stood “listening to the water as it splashed the river-walls of the Island of Paris” ( *Tale*, 388-389 ). Undoubtedly, this reverie is occurring on the Left Bank side of the Île de la Cité, perhaps on the Petit Pont or the Pont Saint-Michel with its well-known view of Notre Dame. In this scene, the bridge becomes a place of clairvoyance:

The night wore out, and, as he stood upon the bridge listening to the water as it splashed the riverwalls of the Island of Paris, where the picturesque confusion of houses and cathedral shone bright in the light of the moon, the day came coldly, looking like a dead face out of the sky. Then, the night, with the moon and the stars, turned pale and died, and for a little while it seemed as if Creation were delivered over to Death’s dominion.

But, the glorious sun, rising, seemed to strike those words, that burden of the night, straight and warm to his heart in its long bright rays. And looking along them, with reverently shaded eyes, a bridge of light appeared to span the air between him and the sun, while the river sparkled under it. ( *Tale*, 388-389 )

Dickens is foreshadowing Carton’s impending sacrificial death and future resurrection in this description of the passage from night to morning. The bridge Carton stands upon finds its ethereal double in the bridge extended to him as a beam of light from heaven, a visual sign that God has approved of the plan he is about to carry out and will extend a similar spiritual bridge to his eternal soul after his death. The closest Dickens comes to depicting heaven is in this passage. Although the depiction never goes beyond detailing Carton’s perceptions and mental states, the omniscient narrator strongly intimates that Carton is bound for heaven in the traditional Christian sense.

Comparing Dickens’s conceptions of heaven and hell, there is a certain mis-

match apparent. The narrator not so subtly hints at the existence of an eternal heaven as a reward for the saints but he never once implies that an eternal place of damnation awaits the unrepentant. In fact, while the word “heaven” appears 39 times in the book, the word “hell” is used only once and even in this case, doubt is cast upon its existence.

“Say then, my husband. What is it?”

“News from the other world!”

“How, then?” cried madame, contemptuously. “The other world?”

“Does everybody here recall old Foulon, who told the famished people that they might eat grass, and who died, and went to Hell?”

“Everybody!” from all throats.

“The news is of him. He is among us!”

“Among us!” from the universal throat again. “And dead?”

“Not dead! He feared us so much and with reason that he caused himself to be represented as dead, and had a grand mock-funeral.” ( *Tale*, 271 )

In this passage, Defarge mentions Foulon, an upper-class scoundrel whom the people had assumed was already dead and “in Hell” but who has managed to stay alive. Why are the revolutionaries so overjoyed that Foulon has been found alive? Because when they thought he was dead they talked of his being in “Hell” but apparently this expression was used only as a curse on his memory, not as profession of belief that he was now in a place of eternal punishment for his sins. Indeed, Madame Defarge’s contempt for talk of the “other world” implies that she does not believe in Hell. If Hell does not exist, then Foulon will have succeeded in escaping his punishment by dying. Now that he has been captured alive, however, he will face his hellish punishment after all ( at their own hands ). For Dickens, there may be a heaven in the afterlife, but hell exists only in the cruelties meted out by humans in this world.

On a related issue, Alter has noted that “there is at least one serious flaw” in the book’s execution:

The symbolic conflict around which the novel is organized ultimately alludes [ ... ] to an opposition between the promised regeneration in Christ and threatened annihilation by the forces of the anti-Christ. The trouble is that while the threat of moral anarchy is as constant and close to Dickens as his own heartbeat, his imagination of resurrection, whether for individuals or societies, is conventionally pious and little more. ( *Demons*, 20 )

Indeed, it is not clear whether Dickens is most hoping to elicit understanding of a potential earthly utopia or a real spiritual heaven through his depiction but he successfully accomplishes neither ( cf. Rignall, 132 ).

Speculating as to Dickens’s concern with the social rather than spiritual aspects of Christianity, Orwell sees the author in “cultural Christian” terms:

Roughly speaking, his morality is the Christian morality, but in spite of his Anglican upbringing he was essentially a Bible-Christian, as he took care to make plain when writing his will. In any case, he cannot properly be described as a religious man. He “believed”, undoubtedly, but religion in the devotional sense does not seem to have entered much into his thoughts. ( Orwell, 458 )

With respect to Dickens’s “spiritual” ambitions for the book it must be said that while the author is wildly successful in his other novels at evoking the cultural atmospheres and population cross-sections of the London which he knew so well, in *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens is decidedly less successful in his attempt to depict the textures and contours of the spiritual realm.

If one posits that Dickens’s readers would include both devout Christian believers and also less heavenly minded co-religionists who valued the faith more for

its effects on earthly society, it might be said that the author has hedged his bets by attempting a portrayal that will satisfy both groups. At times alluding to the existence of a real heaven, he finally grounds the happy ending in terms of Lucie and her descendants, thus raising the thorny question of which result of Carton's death was more important: his eternal salvation or his contribution to the survival of the Darnay family tree? And what are the qualifications for being granted entry into heaven? Must one give up one's life to save another as Carton did? By trying to write his story so as to express the protagonist's reward as heaven, and then throwing in heaven on earth for the Darnay clan almost as an afterthought, Dickens has allowed both personal supernatural heaven and communal earthly utopia to slip through his narrative grasp.

This unsatisfying conclusion does not simply reflect a lack of imagination or a poverty of depiction; it is a structural defect as well. In that Dickens has been relying heavily on counterpoint which echoes the story's dichotomous introduction, the contrived parallelism in the story finally breaks down at the ending not only because the author's vision of 'heaven on earth' is so weak, but also because the suggestion of a real, non-temporal heaven stylistically requires the existence of a real, non-temporal hell, a place of eternal torment for the Marquis St. Evrémonde and Madame Defarge alike, to strike a satisfactory balance. In the end, Dickens's vague heaven seems to have been designed to receive Sydney Carton alone, while hell is a word that the author hesitates to countenance and deals with only in earthly, human terms.

### **Flooding Crowds and Individual Crossings**

From the outset of the story, Dickens identifies the power of the street mob as elemental and irresistible, at least when circumstances cause the forces that motivate it to peak. To express certain destructive aspects of revolutionary activity, Dickens uses a number of interrelated metaphors drawn from the natural world. While De-

farge seems to hope for God's focused judgment to strike as lightning from heaven smiting only those who deserve their punishment, Madame Defarge sees revolutionary force in terms of the indiscriminate and broadly devastating judgment brought about by an earthquake; that is, in terms of an apocalyptic day of reckoning:

"Well, then," said Defarge, as if a thought were wrung out of his breast, "it *is* a long time."

"It is a long time," repeated his wife; "and when is it not a long time? Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule."

"It does not take a long time to strike a man with Lightning," said Defarge.

"How long," demanded madame, composedly, "does it take to make and store the lightning? Tell me." Defarge raised his head thoughtfully, as if there were something in that too.

"It does not take a long time," said madame, "for an earthquake to swallow a town. Eh well! Tell me how long it takes to prepare the earthquake?"

"A long time, I suppose," said Defarge. ( *Tale*, 215 )

While this "earthquake" metaphor offered by Madame Defarge emphasizes the fact that social forces may be gathering unseen to strike with great power at an instant, the "storm" and "flood" metaphors are more prevalent in the narrative. The word "storm" appears 17 times over the course of the story while alternate words that also metaphorically invoke the idea of a "flood" of people are used no less than 30 times (including "overflow" six times, waters "rise"/"rising"/"rose" six times, "wave"/"waves" six times, "swell" four times, "flood" twice, "tossing" twice, "roll" twice, "surging" once, and "billows" once). In the "storm" metaphor, ever-present but usually latent forces gather slowly but their coming is irresistible and result in great chaos. And just as in the case of a storm in the natural world, the sensitive may foresee its onset or discern it from a distance. The first noticeable use of this "great storm" metaphor occurs while the characters are still in England:

But, there were other echoes, from a distance, that rumbled menacingly in the corner all through this space of time. And it was now, about little Lucie's sixth birthday, that they began to have an awful sound, as of a great storm in France with a dreadful sea rising. ( *Tale*, 260 )

In fact, when the "storm" does begin, it is portrayed in terms of floodwaters and sea surge, a rising tide capped off with a tsunami:

"Come, then!" cried Defarge, in a resounding voice. "Patriots and friends, we are ready! The Bastille!" With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm-bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack began. ( *Tale*, 263 )

A white flag from within the fortress, and a parley this dimly perceptible through the raging storm, nothing audible in it suddenly the sea rose immeasurably wider and higher, and swept Defarge of the wine-shop over the lowered drawbridge, past the massive stone outer walls, in among the eight great towers surrendered! ( *Tale*, 264 )

Even in the instances of relative calm, the depiction in terms of floodwaters remains. The dancing of the Carmagnole in the following passage clearly associates rising tides with emotional excess:

Instantly, all the rest fell to dancing, and the courtyard overflowed with the Carmagnole. Then, they elevated into the vacant chair a young woman from the crowd to be carried as the Goddess of Liberty, and then swelling and overflowing out into the adjacent streets, and along the river's bank, and over the bridge, the Carmagnole absorbed them every one and whirled them away. ( *Tale*, 353 )

In this passage, the crowd is depicted less as crossing the bridge than as flooding “over it,” in the way that a river would rise to sweep a span away. In light of the fact that such “storm” and “flood”-oriented depiction is used so consistently (together more than 47 times over the course of the book) with reference to the crowds, this sustained metaphorical representation cannot be brushed aside as localized flourish or incidental idiosyncrasy of depiction. Without exception, Dickens has portrayed crowds of people not as voluntary gatherings of rational individuals but as randomly emergent, chaotic convergences of popular energy.

Although this kind of broad and systematic use of metaphor may or may not have been conscious artifice on the part of the author, it matters little which. For even if it is not the result of active decision-making in composition, the coherence of metaphorical depiction stands nonetheless. In portraying the crowds of Paris and London in terms of “floods,” Dickens firmly establishes the apparent irrationality and unaccountability that characterizes their actions. Whether he accomplished this on purpose (that is, in terms of carefully elaborated metaphorical extension) or unconsciously (as a subtext which, although instantiated spontaneously, nevertheless puts predispositions in the inner workings of the author’s mind on display), the resulting effect within the work as a whole remains the same. The metaphors within the story cohere and one cannot say, with respect to depiction, that the crowds mentioned in the story act calmly or rationally. The metaphorical implications of the specific words Dickens has chosen have precluded that possibility.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that this aspect of Dickens’s coherence of depiction may have been inspired by Blake. Tearle notes how one depiction of a mob accompanying a hearse through London’s streets includes specific details that seem to allude to some of the images of social criticism in Blake’s “London” (1794). Among other things, he notes how the crying chimney-sweep from Blake’s poem is driving the hearse in the chaotic funeral scene depicted by Dickens (Tearle, 336). Of particular interest, however, is the way that Dickens somewhat arbitrarily men-

tions the otherwise irrelevant fact that the River Thames is “alarmingly near” (*Tale*, 188) to the disorderly procession’s course. Noting the specific expressions used in Blake’s poem, a stark contrast is evident when compared with the way that the “charter’d Thames does flow” (“London”, 18). Of course, Tearle’s commentary is thought-provoking but succinct and he does not look for Blake’s influence beyond this particular scene. In retrospect, with the prevalence of the flood metaphor sufficiently accounted for, Dickens “dreadful sea rising” (*Tale*, 260) to floodtide in France seems to be an image designed to show the “charter’d Thames” of “London” as something not to be taken for granted. While Blake has depicted a shackled and subdued Thames, Dickens asserts that the apparent helplessness of the river is an illusion; under the right conditions, floods are no less possible in London than in Paris. To quote Alter, “[t]hroughout the novel, the English mob is in potential what the French revolutionary hordes are in bloody fact” (*Demons*, 16). Dickens uses “storm” and “flood” references interspersed through his story to drive the point home.

In contrast to the repeated references to “floods” and “storms” in the characterizations of the mobs that threaten the order of London and Paris, the English protagonists are either contemplative as they view the waters or ignore them altogether. One of these is Sydney Carton. What is Carton’s relationship to the “storm” and the “flood” that is soon to engulf him? In his final moments of reflection, he sees the turbulent waters that will soon claim his life not as a grievous human contrivance but as a particularly sudden swell of an ever-present natural current, the current that carries all living things with it, sooner or later, to the sea of death:

The strong tide, so swift, so deep, and certain, was like a congenial friend, in the morning stillness. He walked by the stream, far from the houses, and in the light and warmth of the sun fell asleep on the bank. When he awoke and was afoot again, he lingered there yet a little longer, watching an eddy that turned and turned purposeless, until the stream

absorbed it, and carried it on to the sea. "Like me." ( *Tale*, 389 )

In this passage, the historical implications of Dickens "flood" image breaks the surface in Carton's contemplative simile. While the revolutionaries can speed the coming of death to some extent, in the end no one has the power to resist their own mortality.

Although Paris was and is a city with no lack of beautiful and evocative bridges, the only bridge mentioned by name in the book is the Pont-Neuf. This "new" bridge is, oddly enough, associated with perhaps the most conservative figure in the story, Miss Pross. She fails to notice the river at all as she hurriedly crosses the bridge while going about her duties, faithfully serving Lucie and her family:

Happily unconscious of the new calamity at home, Miss Pross threaded her way along the narrow streets and crossed the river by the bridge of the Pont-Neuf, reckoning in her mind the number of indispensable purchases she had to make. ( *Tale*, 362 )

Following this bridge-crossing scene, Miss Pross, by way of her mundane Christian faithfulness and often flawed attempts to do the right thing, naively and almost automatically refuses to succumb to the ruthless Madame Defarge and, in so doing, causes all to come out right. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, good vanquishes evil only in a limited way and even then it does so against all odds but the victory is not accidental. In retrospect, Miss Pross was able to defeat Madame Defarge because she believed in the power of good and chose the course she felt her duty required. Conversely, Madame Defarge was defeated not because she had lost the indignation that motivated her personal vendetta but because she had separated herself from the "storms" and "floods" of the street mobs that had given her power in the first place. She had not kept in mind her own observations on patience and stealth: while her strong will was certainly effective in focusing the power of the crowd, that power

derived from the temporary excitement of the crowd itself and not from the intensity of her personal desire for revenge.

#### 4 . Concerning Ambiguity in the Title

After analyzing the major metaphors and images that have been counter-pointed in the work, it is evident that the title *A Tale of Two Cities* does not simply refer to London and Paris, as the story's reader may have presumed from the outset. While certainly revolution has come to Paris and has not come to London and this particular difference is inseparable from the plot, Dickens has gone to great lengths to problematize this oversimplistic distinction. While the mercilessness of the revolution in Paris is depicted in terms of execution by guillotine, London is portrayed not in terms of the cross but according to its capricious legal system that coldly distributes capital punishment sentences for even trivial offenses:

But indeed, at that time, putting to death was a recipe much in vogue with all trades and professions, and not least of all with Tellson's. Death is Nature's remedy for all things, and why not Legislation's? Accordingly, 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; the holder of a horse at Tellson's door, who made off with it, was put to Death; the coiner of a bad shilling was put to Death; the sounders of three-fourths of the notes in the whole gamut of Crime, were put to Death. ( *Tale*, 60-61 )

In a similar way, not all of the residents of France are seen to be bloodthirsty revolutionaries. Dickens uses a number of vividly depicted passages to express the injustice that has resulted in the plight of the poor in France. For example:

The village had its one poor street, with its poor brewery, poor tannery, poor tavern, poor

stable-yard for relays of post-horses, poor fountain, all usual poor appointments. It had its poor people too. All its people were poor, and many of them were sitting at their doors, shredding spare onions and the like for supper, while many were at the fountain, washing leaves, and grasses, and any such small yieldings of the earth that could be eaten. Expressive sips of what made them poor, were not wanting; the tax for the state, the tax for the church, the tax for the lord, tax local and tax general, were to be paid here and to be paid there, according to solemn inscription in the little village, until the wonder was, that there was any village left unswallowed. ( *Tale*, 135 )

The above passages show Dickens's acknowledgement that injustice was evident perhaps equally in both countries and so *A Tale of Two Cities* cannot simply be understood as a tale affirming London and critiquing Paris.

To the extent that the good and the bad exist side by side in each country, Orwell is correct when he observes that “[ t ]wo things can be very much alike and yet abysmally different. Heaven and Hell are in the same place. Useless to change institutions without a “change of heart” that, essentially, is what [ Dickens ] is always saying” (Orwell, 427) . On the other hand, to wholeheartedly accept Orwell's statement is to eliminate all communal aspects in the contrast and thereby cause the title to seem ironic. Orwell has realized the ways in which Dickens has problematized a purely ‘civic’ interpretation of the title but failed to fully account for the extent to which the author drives a wedge between the good and the amoral through consistent emphasis in depiction.

Dickens gave the book its title knowing that the reader would initially interpret it to reference London and Paris and also knowing that such an interpretation would not stand up to close scrutiny in the end. Nevertheless, while this straightforward interpretation of the title can never be logically precluded and so survives in a marginalized way, a surreptitious counterpart interpretation gradually emerges as Dickens offers his consistently stylized view of events. As the author methodically

sets up spiritual and ethical oppositions between the Christian cross and the Republic's guillotine, between Sydney Carton's willingness to sacrifice himself and Madame Defarge's insatiable thirst for vengeance, and between the "bridge of light" mercifully extended to Carton at the story's end and the stormed drawbridges of the Bastille, the two municipalities in question may be understood to be the City of God and the City of Man. In one sense, Orwell is right to insist that these two municipalities exist side by side on earth. Nevertheless, Dickens's depiction emphasizes the great spiritual and ethical separation between the two and firmly grounds his own ethical views in the Christian tradition. Precisely because the original interpretation is not precluded, only superseded by this new understanding, the title seems decidedly richer in retrospect.

According to Stewart, "[t]he hero's communion with pure futurity at the end, when it turns him to the equal purity of completion and retrospect in the last sentence, is thus cadenced in a rectifying echo of the novel's opening" (Stewart, 117). While Dickens does achieve something of a resolution to the foregoing dialectic between Light and Darkness through Carton's final soliloquy on the bridge, many difficult questions remain unanswered. It might be said that the famous opening passage perhaps functioned too well. The distinctions between the earthly hell Dickens so vividly depicts and the eternal heaven he fails to convincingly portray leave the reader wondering how exactly to synthesize the string of dichotomies proffered at the outset. Perhaps precisely for this reason, the work is highly engaging; whether due to careful craftsmanship or unnoticed design flaw, the story asks questions of the reader, the answers for which are not found within its pages.

## 5 . Conclusion

There can be little doubt that Dickens's story amounts to a departure from his greater oeuvre. In particular, Alter notes that the story lacks the organic coherence that most of Dickens's tales so effortlessly achieve:

On the one hand, it is clear that Dickens was attempting something new, as he himself confesses in his letters, in treating this whole historical subject. The fact, on the other hand, that the general strategy of this novel differs from that of his other fiction has the effect of leaving certain regrettable conventional elements nakedly exposed which, in the more typical novels, are submerged in the great swirl of brilliant fantastication that can only be called Dickensian. (*Demons*, 13)

Alter does recognize, however, the historical impulse that guides the author's hand as he attempts to characterize past events in ethical terms. He comments:

As nowhere else in his writing, Dickens wants to generalize his subject, and so he repeatedly holds the novel images, characters, events at a long distance to be seen in broad overview, its materials arranged in manifestly formal patterns. (*Demons*, 14)

Chesterton, offering a half-hearted defense, notes that "[in] dignity and eloquence [*A Tale of Two Cities*] stands alone among the books by Dickens. But it also stands alone among his books in this respect, that it is not entirely by Dickens. It owes its inspiration avowedly to the passionate and cloudy pages of Carlyle's 'French Revolution'" (Chesterton, 180). In this way, Chesterton absolves Dickens the novelist by indicting Dickens the armchair historian. Although remaining innocent of literary crimes as such, Dickens had allowed his ideas to be influenced by the bombastic Carlyle.

While insightful, Chesterton's comment fails to distinguish the fact that Dickens was perhaps more justified than Carlyle in his artifice. After all, Carlyle had attempted to write history as if it were literature, while Dickens had done just the opposite. Dickens's rhetorical artifice can be condemned only to the extent that one takes his history seriously. Chesterton takes it seriously and therefore his critique is ultimately grounded entirely in questions of historical interpretation and fails to

take Dickens's non-historical goals into account.

And yet the ethical viewpoints highlighted in *A Tale of Two Cities* cannot be called exceptional when one considers the many other works Dickens wrote. After all, Chesterton cannot claim that the morality evident in *A Tale of Two Cities* is somehow qualitatively different from that of his other works. It is the same ethical system, only emphasized and idealized to a greater extent. Dickens has simply located a highly evocative episode of historic interest, replete with legend even before he began to write about it, which offered a perfect setting in which to delineate his usually half-hidden ethical perspectives. As such, the story gives us a clear view of Dickens and his literary goals in a way that other less stylized stories do not.

*A Tale of Two Cities* was a successful work and has perhaps garnered cynical critical assessments at least partially due to its popularity with a broad readership. In that a majority of Dickens's contemporary readers were probably Christian to a greater or lesser extent, it should not be surprising that the story's enduring popular reputation seems critically unwarranted by 21st century standards. Of course, one does not need to believe in heaven, or even be a Christian *per se* to appreciate Dickens's viewpoint. In depicting Lucie's family as a sort of ongoing mini-utopia made possible by Carton's sacrifice, he gives the non-believer a way to appreciate the book apart from the overtly Christian metaphysical considerations.

Questions of such hedging aside, Dickens has placed an unapologetically Christian ethical dichotomy at the heart of the work. To offer forgiveness when faced with a sinner's genuine repentance is not only a Christian virtue but an ideal which for millennia has been concretely articulated in the symbol of the cross. This essential precept of Christian belief does indeed run counter to the spirit of the French Revolution; to assert that true repentance on the part of those who have caused others to suffer is impossible and to feel justified in denying them forgiveness no matter the mitigating circumstances is part and parcel of the "reign of terror." More than simply offering a point of contrast with Christian ethics, then, the

moral viewpoint depicted is fundamentally opposed to the very essence of the Christian faith. Dickens recognized this and *A Tale of Two Cities* was his attempt to clarify this ethical opposition in literary terms.

A question Dickens fails to concretely ask or answer is this: outside of the Christian tradition, can such unflinching class retribution ever be ethically condoned? He seems to presume the culturally Christian reader will intuitively disapprove but offers no reason for others. Indeed, Chesterton's inability to agree with his outlook may be a result of this very weakness. Chesterton, although a Christian, seems sympathetic to the idea that, with an earthly enduring Utopia as the explicit goal, perhaps merciless revolution would be possible to justify. Of course to adequately excuse such cruelty, the achieved ends would need to be magnificent, indeed. Speaking in purely utilitarian terms, one may quote the British Colonial Office Secretary and imperialist Joseph Chamberlain in his famous adage, "You cannot have omelettes without breaking eggs" (Ferguson, 222). When this argument was put forward by a proponent of communist revolution, Orwell replied "Where's the omelette?" (Gross, 287).

Orwell's question certainly rings true with respect to the French Revolution which did not result in any permanent societal accommodation for France but rather created a political atmosphere in which those in power must constantly look fearfully over their shoulders. Indeed, France's post-revolutionary politics have been characterized by a governing style that almost unfailingly goes weak in the knees at the mere sight of demonstrators taking to the streets. This trend is not by any means limited to the past; recent examples include the lack of resolve in dealing with the seemingly annual car-burning riots across France and the successful street protests that effectively cut off debate on the CPE labor law reform proposal in April, 2006 (cf. Knabb, 5; Krauthammer, 96). Whether in terms of the morally corrosive effects of spurring on vindictive retaliation in the public sphere or the unconstructive atmospheres that tend to result after such base instincts have been appeased, the

ruthless methods of the French Revolution and other uncompromising revolutions like it seem exceedingly difficult to justify.

Hutter has observed that Dickens's foray into purely ethical territory was a miscalculation and his thoroughgoing stylistic willfulness robbed the story of the humor typically present in his other stories (Hutter, 56). On the other hand, Monod notes that "[the story's] contrivance is usually superb" (Monod, 185). In the case of *A Tale of Two Cities*, do Dickens's ethical and ideological ends justify his stylistic means? Ultimately, the two-fold reaction to his story is less a purely critical reaction than an ethical and ideological one. Those whose viewpoints on religion and ethics find keen insight in the moral division he has (whether rightly or wrongly) detected in the historical events and painstakingly instantiated into the story are likely to feel that he has to some extent succeeded, while those who do not recognize the value in his insights are likely to see the stylistic choices not as necessary compromises but as arbitrary poetic artifice put to no justified end. In the final analysis, the dichotomy found in the heart of *A Tale of Two Cities* is not simply internal but actually extends outward even to the criticism that has been written about the work.

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