Essays and Criticism

Critical Analysis of A Tale of Two Cities

With its famous opening line "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times," A Tale of Two Cities was plainly intended by Dickens as a study in dramatic contrasts. Clear-cut polarities furnish this story of individuals caught in the maelstrom of the French Revolution with its central dynamic. Portraying events that take place over nearly two decades, the novel's setting shifts from the repression of autocratic rule and the impassioned violence it unleashes in Paris to the rule of law and the humane concern in London as a (temporarily) safe haven. The author's over-arching message arises in the context of sharp contrasts between chaos and order, light and dark, hope and despair, heaven and hell. This is a work that is essentially devoid of all ambiguity, one in which the good characters are without moral blemish, while the evil ones are without redeeming qualities. But A Tale of Two Cities is also open-ended. Its uplifting outcome pivots upon miracles of personal resurrection and self-sacrifice, as the author insists that nothing short of spiritual renewal can prevent his own society from suffering the type of upheaval that erupted across the English Channel at the end of the eighteenth century.

The theme of duality is manifest in Dickens's recourse to the device of twinned characters. Charles Darnay's father and his uncle are, of course, biological twins, and the elder St. Evermondes are indistinguishable in their haughty cruelty. It is, however, the close physical resemblance between Darnay and the world-weary lawyer Sidney Carton that the author exploits to the utmost. Unjustly accused of treason, Darnay's case in London appears to be lost until his attorney, Mr. Stryker, discredits the testimony of an eyewitness by challenging him to discriminate between the defendant and Carton. The uncanny physical likeness between the two men surfaces again in the novel's concluding chapters, when Carton substitutes himself for Darnay as a victim of revolutionary justice in France. As personalities, Carton is plainly the more complicated of the two and he is far more competent than his well-intentioned but consistently ineffective counterpart. Yet both men are in love with the exceedingly pure Lucy Manette, a saintly figure whose goodness matches that of Darnay and, at the same time, has the power to transmute Carton from a cynic into a self-sacrificing idealist.

In the first of the novel's three sections, we learn that Darnay's father and uncle were responsible for the imprisonment of Dr. Manette, and we see the fruits of despotism in his wasted, spectral figure. But it is not until Book Two that Dickens gives us a first-hand example of the callous indifference that the French aristocracy has adopted toward the common people. When the gilded carriage of the Marquis St. Evermonde tramples Gaspard's child, leaving behind a tossed gold coin in its wake, it is apparent that the rule of the great lords is directly responsible for misery that the peasants and workmen of France have suffered for so long. We later learn that Madame DeFarge's entire family has been raped or murdered by the Evermondes, and that these crimes are characteristic of the entire class of aristocrats.

Despite the evident injustices, Dickens depicts the French Revolution of Book Three in elemental terms, as a storm driven by a passion for revenge. It is not social injustice of the ancient regime, but individual barbarity, which Dickens assaults. Indeed, an intemperate urge for revenge is presented by the author as being as evil as the indifference of the aristocrats to the miseries that they have inflicted. Arguably, the work's central villain is not Darnay's uncle, but his chief accuser, Madame DeFarge. The French mob hangs the aristocrat Foulon...
without trial and they hold captive Monsieur Gabelle, a St. Evermonde family retainer whose only offense is that he has served in an aristocrat's household. Moreover, in the second French trial of Charles Darnay, there is no charge leveled against him other than being the scion of a proud aristocratic family. Throughout the text, Dickens directs the reader's sympathies toward the innocent victims but he does not allow us to share the fury of the vindictive. On the scaffold, Sidney Carton foresees the deaths of the judge and jury that have imposed execution on Darnay (and hence himself), but he does not express any personal animosity toward them, leaving their punishment in God's hands.

By the end of the novel, Darnay is one of three characters who have experienced a spiritual rebirth, and it is resurrection with decidedly Christian overtones that comprises the salient theme of the novel. At the outset of the story, Jarvis Lorry conveys a message to Lucy Manette in bold script: "RECALLED TO LIFE." Indeed, the first of the A Tale of Two Cities bears that same subtitle and Dickens initially considered calling the entire work Recalled to Life.

It is Dr. Manette to which this initially arcane message refers. Representative of the old Humanist spirit that once animated French society, at the novel's start he has been figuratively "buried alive" for eighteen years. Encountering the good doctor in the flesh, his daughter finds a man whom she can barely recognize, aged beyond his years, completely distracted from the world, and engaged in a mechanical craft. But transported to England and placed under Lucy's benevolent care, Dr. Manette is restored to his old spirit. By the time that Charles Darnay begins his courtship of Lucy, Dickens shows us a reborn Manette, observing that, "the energy which had once supported him in his old sufferings and aggravated their sharpness had been gradually restored to him. He was now a very energetic man indeed, with great firmness of purpose, strength of resolution, and vigor of action" (pp.117-118). Following his resurrection, the good doctor becomes an active force in the novel, saving Darnay during his first trial in France.

Jerry Cruncher transports the message that Lorry writes to Lucy at the beginning of the novel to her. Sharing the initials "J. C." with Jesus Christ, Jerry is a vulgar character who supplements his living by working as a "resurrection man," digging up recently planted graves and selling the corpses to medical schools. This is, of course, an illegal version of moonlighting, and Cruncher is also acutely aware of its sacrilegious nature, side-stepping his son's inquiry about his vocation by saying that he is engaged in "agricultural pursuits." Ultimately, however, he is compelled by circumstances to disclose the true nature of his nocturnal past-time. As significant, he repents his past misdeeds, saying to Miss Pross, "never no more will I do it, never no more!" (p.333). On his own, lower-case level, then, Cruncher undergoes a spiritual transformation, a "resurrection."

Dickens reserves the most important example of resurrection for Sidney Carton. When he first encounters his rival for Lucy's affections, Carton tells Charles Darnay that "I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me" (p.75). Despite his prodigious talents at the law, Carton is entirely alienated from those around him. While Dickens does not furnish any explicit reasons for the barrister's self-characterized identity as a "disappointed drudge," he makes it plain that this is a valid judgment. Carton too undergoes a resurrection. As he resolves to sacrifice himself for Lucy's sake, his mind turns to the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever believeth in me, shall never die" (p.287). In the end it is a "far, far better thing" (p.345), that Carton does by giving up his life than he had ever done before.

All of the good characters in the novel are self-sacrificing, and in sharp relief to the French revolutionaries, they risk their lives or exert positive influence for other individuals rather than some broad social cause. Lucy Manette, of course, is the golden thread that allows her father to undergo restoration, and it is her benevolent influence that supplies the spark that begins Sidney Carton's transformation. Following his resurrection, Dr. Manette returns to France, where he becomes a Christ-like healer, braving the terrors of the Revolution and ministering to assassins and victims alike as "a man apart" (p.250). At one juncture, Carton discloses to Lucy
that "you kindled me, heap of ashes that I am, into fire" (p.136). He ultimately himself sacrifices himself on behalf of Lucy's happiness. In the final chapter of the book, Carton comforts a young girl who is slated for the guillotine by saying, "'Keep your eyes upon me, dear child, and mind no other object'" (p.343), thereby a function that approximates that of Jesus Christ. Even the semi-comical Jerry Cruncher sacrifices his own interests by revealing first to Carton and then to his employer Lorry, that he is a "resurrection" man to demonstrate his knowledge of the falsity of Basard's lies about Darnay.

Ultimately the themes of social revolution and personal resurrection/self-sacrifice converge to form a unified thematic whole. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens issues a warning to his fellow Englishmen, asserting that if they "sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again" (p.340), they too may find themselves in the shadow of La Guillotine. But he does not put forth any blueprint for social reform to avoid this eventuality. Instead, through his story, Dickens implores his readers to undertake their own spiritual renewal, to shun the desire for revenge and to act in a spirit of Christian compassion and self-sacrifice towards those in their midst.
Obsession with Duality

In a preface to A Tale of Two Cities Dickens described how the idea for the novel came to him when he was playing a role in 1857 in a theatrical production of The Frozen Deep, a play written by his friend Wilkie Collins. In the play a man involved in a love triangle sacrifices his life to save the rival suitor of the woman he loves. Dickens's account of the origins of the novel points to Sydney Carton as the central character of A Tale of Two Cities, although other evidence suggests that other ideas might have played as large a role in the birth of the book. In notebooks as early as 1855 there appear references to the fate of people released after long imprisonment and to the phrase "Buried Alive," which was for a time Dickens's working title for A Tale of Two Cities. "Recalled to Life" became his title for Part I of the novel. This evidence places Dr. Manette's imprisonment center stage. An argument for either character as focal misses Dickens's craft in bringing those two characters—and others—together in the theme of resurrection and renewal, life, death and rebirth in this story of the French Revolution.

The secrecy shadowing the opening chapter, best expressed in the cryptic message "Recalled to Life," attends the effort to retrieve Dr. Manette from the French prison where he has been "buried" for eighteen years. Three times Dickens repeats the following exchange:

"Buried how long?"

"Almost eighteen years."

"I hope you care to live."

"I can't say."

Dr. Manette, a man figuratively returned from the grave and given life again, is the first of many characters in the novel whose life story is the story of death and rebirth. Charles Darnay, on trial for his life at the book's opening, is acquitted; then in France not once but twice, he is retried, each time to be rescued from a near certain death by guillotine. He is rescued first by Carton, then by Dr. Manette, then again by Carton, who speaks the words of the Anglican funeral service, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Carton himself is figuratively brought to life by his heroic role in the novel. In his first appearance, at Darnay's trial, Carton is the Jackal to Stryver's Lion, a man whose promise has ended in a dissolute alcoholism and idleness. When he describes himself to Lucie as a "self-flung away, wasted, drunken, poor creature of misuse," she asks: "Can I not recall you … to a better course?" Indeed she does. In his self-sacrificing devotion to Lucie he finds redemption, giving his life that Darnay might live, the savior saved.

Dickens extends the "Recalled to Life" theme to the secondary characters, sometimes in comic ways. Jerry Cruncher, for example, is a "Resurrection Man," the term given to those who robbed the graves of the freshly buried to keep the anatomy schools supplied with corpses. Cruncher's efforts to retrieve the body of Roger Cly following his burial are stymied when he discovers an empty casket. Cly's death and burial as an Old Bailey spy, complete with an enraged London mob, is a fraud, a means of his escaping England with John Barsad. Cly, too, then, is "buried" and resurrected. The aristocrat Foulon tries the same trick in Paris, but the enraged French mob will not be fooled. "Resurrected" from a staged death, he is then killed, his mouth stuffed with grass in fitting vengeance for his once having told the hungry peasantry to eat grass.

The larger canvas on which Dickens works is the story of the two cities of the title, the historical account of the French Revolution about which Dickens also thinks in terms of death and renewal, for the Revolution is the death of the ancien regime and the birth of the Republic, the bloody and fiery renewal of France. In the same preface in which he spoke of the genesis of the novel in his participation in Collins's play, Dickens also
expressed his gratitude to Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, whose *The French Revolution* (1837) Dickens once claimed in a letter to have read "for the 500th time." From Carlyle, Dickens took both numerous specific details about the Revolution and a more general view of history. Carlyle viewed history as a grand succession of eras, often in cycles of destruction and reconstitution. In history there was always a revelation of a divine moral order at work in the world. The French Revolution, the single most significant recent event in the lives of those like Carlyle and Dickens who were born in the Napoleonic aftermath, offered abundant lessons regarding the presence of the past. Horrified by the Terror of 1793, the English read the lesson that corruption breeds corruption, that extremes are followed by extremes. The earlier generation of English writers, typified by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth were stirred by the ambitious idealism of the Revolution. To Dickens, by contrast, although he evoked sentimental ideals in Carton's sacrifice to save the life of a rival lover, there was nothing romantic or idealizing about what death was necessary to recall to life a nation.

The avenging revolutionaries are as dreadful as those whom they overthrow. Dickens allots a single chapter to recounting the rape of the young peasant girl, Madame Defarge's sister, at Darnay's second trial when Defarge reads from the account of the affair which Dr. Manette had written in 1857. Only three chapters sketch the proud indifference to the suffering of the peasantry of Monseigneur St. Evremonde, Damay's uncle, leading to his murder. The remaining French chapters unroll in all their gruesome predictability the equally barbarous French mobs of the Revolution. In other words, Dickens is more horrified by the sins of the Revolutionaries than by the sins of the aristocrats which give birth to revolution. Except for the Defarges, who are given names and more singular identities, the Revolutionaries are seen collectively, all of them named "Jacques." St. Antoine, a place name for a Paris suburb, is personified, given a collective identity. In the Carmagnole, the frenzied dance in the Paris streets which follows Darnay’s acquittal in his first French trial, all identities merge into one destructive force. Finally, characters have identities not as persons but as awful functions in the Revolution, as in the case of Vengeance, who accompanies the Defarges.

With death and life so closely linked in the renewal theme, Dickens found a strategy for his presentation. He presents, beginning with the title, complementary and contradictory pairs of places, characters, events, and ideas. London and Paris, the former apparently a safe haven, the latter a hell, are more similar than they seem. Darnay is tried in both cities. The mob at Cly's "burial" is as frenzied as the ones in Paris. At the Manettes' apartment in Soho, a thunderstorm disrupts an outdoor Sunday dinner, driving the Manettes inside for safety while people hurry in the streets, their footsteps "the footsteps destined to come to all of us."

Characters are doubles of each other. Carton resembles Darnay, in the beginning physically but not morally, in the end reversed. Darnay himself, having renounced his birthright, is a ghost of the Evremondes. Darnay's father and uncle are twins, indistinguishable in their awful pride. Dr. Manette has two selves, the imprisoned man who flees the horror of his imprisonment by reducing his life to work on a shoe bench, and the rescued man who several times regresses to his former self.

Even Dickens's style reflects his obsession with duality. The famous opening passage almost traps Dickens, like a repeated melody which he cannot stop:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far 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.

The key note struck is contradiction, but the passage also points to the similarity between the age of the French Revolution and Dickens's own. His story insists that all ages are one in the call of duty and the threat
to civility and virtue. His most virtuous characters in the book—Lucie, Darnay, Carton, Manette, Lorry—are self-sacrificing, but, unlike the Revolutionaries, who insist on self-sacrifice for the sake of Revolution, Dickens's virtuous ones give of themselves for another individual. For Dickens the grand sweep of historical events is still dwarfed by the power of personal relationships in which life, death, and renewal are less ambiguous, as the Revolution disappears before Carton's final words: "It is a far, far better thing I do than any I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than any I have ever known." Dickens's apparent solution to the problem of a world so troubled that it spawns vengeful revolution is a call to a moral renewal in our personal relationships which would make such revolutions unnecessary.

Source: George V. Griffith, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999. Griffith is a professor of English and philosophy at Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska.
A Tale of Two Characters: A Study in Multiple Projection

Lucie is basically only one more in the line of Dickensian virgin-heroines whom the critic Edwin Pugh [in *The Charles Dickens Originals*, 1925] felicitously called "feminanities." Yet, as Professor Edgar Johnson clearly saw [in his book *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, Vol. II, 1952], there was a subtle distinction.

Lucie … is given hardly any individual traits at all, although her appearance, as Dickens describes it, is like that of Ellen, "a short, slight, pretty figure, a quantity of golden hair, a pair of blue eyes," and it may be that her one unique physical characteristic was drawn from Ellen too: "a forehead with a singular capacity (remembering how young and smooth it was), of lifting and knitting itself into an expression that was not quite one of perplexity, or wonder, or alarm, though it included all the four expressions." … The fact that Lucie and Dr. Manette at the time of his release from the Bastille are of almost the same age as Ellen and Dickens does not mean that the Doctor's feeling for his daughter is the emotion Dickens felt for the pretty, blue-eyed actress, although the two merge perhaps in his fervent declaration [in his letter protesting the scandal, a letter which he "never meant to be published"] that he knows Ellen to be as "innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughter."

But Lucie fails to fit into the pattern of the unattainable dream-virgin of the earlier novels in at least one other respect. Most of Dickens' earlier heroine-ideals do not marry until the last-chapter summation of the "lived-happily-ever-after" pattern. Lucie is married, happily married, through much of the book. She maintains a household for her husband and her father, and she finds room for compassion, if not love, for the erring Carton. What is more, she has children, two of them. Yet she seems never to grow older. She was seventeen in 1775; she is, to all intents and purposes, seventeen in 1792. In the interim she has allegedly given birth to two Dickens-ideal infants, two of the most sickening little poppets we could possibly expect from one who, despite his experience as the father of ten children, still sought desperately to re-create infancy and childhood in an image which would affirm his own concept of unworldly innocence. Let the reader take a firm grip on himself and read the dying words of the little son of Charles and Lucie Darnay, who died in early childhood for no other reason, it must seem, than to give the author another opportunity to wallow in bathos.

"Dear papa and mamma, I am very sorry to leave you both, and to leave my pretty sister; but I am called, and I must go!" …

"Poor Carton! Kiss him for me!"

Poor Carton, indeed! Poor Dickens! Little Lucie is not much better, for in Paris, after her father's condemnation, when her mother is mercifully unconscious and unaware of Carton's presence, she cries out in sweet childish innocence to friend Sydney:

"Oh, Carton, Carton, dear Carton! … Now that you have come, I think you will do something to help mamma, something to save papa! Oh, look at her, dear Carton! Can you, of all the people who love her bear to see her so?"

Out of the mouths of babes! At this point there is obviously nothing for Sydney to do but head straight for the nearest guillotine.

But Sydney is not to be left wholly without his own dream girl. Just as the purified Darnay is permitted to live out his life with the "attained" (and untainted) Lucie, so the dying Carton is accompanied to his execution by the virgin-victim, the innocent seamstress whom he solaces and strengthens until the final moments of their
love-death, although her first glance had revealed that he was not the man Darnay whom she had previously admired.

Since the pattern of attainability is characteristic of the primary "virgin" in this novel, the figure of the *decayed virgin*, the older freak and enemy, is markedly absent from it. A few novels back, Dickens had had such characters in the immortal Sairey Gamp (*Martin Chuzzlewit*) and Mrs. Pipchin (*Dombey and Son*); he was to have the most horrifying of them all in his very next novel (*Great Expectations*) in the person of Miss Havisham. Here Miss Pross, although she has many of the elements of the "freak" in the best Dickensian tradition, is all benevolence, with her red-headed queerness overshadowed by her devoted love and affectionate care of the virgin-queen to whom she is a substitute mother, with no flaw except her unconquerable belief in the virtue and nobility of her erring brother Solomon. Just as she, the benevolent mother-protectress, is herself merely an aged virgin, so her counterpart and rival is the childless wife (also a devoted, albeit vindictive, sister), Thérèse Defarge. The word *rival* is used advisedly, for while there is no sign of overt rivalry between the two during nine-tenths of the novel, Dickens goes out of his way to bring them face to face at the end. He strains all of his plot structure to have Miss Pross left there alone to face her. Then a melodramatic physical encounter ensues between the two women, neither of whom can, in any sense of the words, speak the other's language. Lucie's bad angel falls dead (accidentally, of course, by her own hand), but the good angel is not unscathed, and if, in her later life, her "queerness" is augmented by the ear-trumpet which she will no doubt use, yet all will know that she came by this crowning, though no doubt humorous, affliction in a good cause.

Although the category of mother-figure is limited, there is no lack of father-counterparts, for the law-as-father has become blended with the fear of condemnation by society, which thereby also becomes a symbolic father-figure. Society and its moral sanctions constitute the only fly in the ointment of adolescent happiness in a sinful love. We have noted that, as a propitiatory gesture, Charles's wicked father-enemy is not his father (as he well might have been) but his thoroughly aristocratic twin-uncle, who, being French, is more villainous than any British father-enemy might have been. Mr. Stryver, in his vampirish relationship with Carton, is another figure of the worthless "father" who sucks the blood of his talented "son." And since Dickens almost always maintains a balance between evil and virtuous figures in all categories, we have, on the benevolent side, Mr. Lorry, another unmarried "father," the only living figure in the gallery of scarecrows who inhabit Tellson's Bank. Midway between the two classes is the hagridden Ernest Defarge, whose every attempt at benevolence is thwarted by his vengeful wife and her abettors, the allegorically named *Vengeance* and the members of the society of Jacques. This last-named group produces one brilliantly sketched psychopath, the sadistic, finger-chewing Jacques Three.

The one remaining father-figure is the most interesting, complex, and well-developed character in the whole novel, Dr. Manette. Since he could not have been much more than twenty-five years old when he was torn from his newly-wedded English wife to be imprisoned in the Bastille for nearly eighteen years, he must have been less than forty-five when we first met him in Defarge's garret. And Dickens, let it be remembered, was forty-five when he wrote of him. Here is his portrait:

A broad ray of light fell into the garret, and showed the workman, with an unfinished shoe upon his lap, pausing in his labour. His few common tools and various scraps of leather were at his feet and on his bench. He had a white beard, raggedly cut, but not very long, a hollow face, and exceedingly bright eyes. The hollowness and thinness of his face would have caused them to look large, under his yet dark eyebrows and his confused white hair, though they had been really otherwise, but they were naturally large, and looked unnaturally so. His yellow rags of shirt lay open at the throat, and showed his body to be withered and worn.

Of course the appearance of great age in a middle-age man is rationally explained by the suffering entailed by his long, unjust imprisonment. Yet, nearly eighteen years later (the repetition of the number is meaningful),
when he has become the unwitting agent of his son-in-law's destruction and has been unable to use his special influence to procure Charles' release, he is pictured as a decayed mass of senility.

"Who goes here? Whom have we within? Papers!"

The papers are handed out and read.

"Alexandra Manette. Physician. French. Which is he?"

"This is he,"

this helpless, inarticulately murmuring, wandering old man pointed out.

"Apparently the Citizen-Doctor is not in his right mind? The Revolution-fever will have been too much for him?"

Greatly too much for him. Carton envisions his complete recovery, but we have some difficulty in believing it.

In the interim, however, he is pictured as a stalwart, middle-aged medical practitioner. His sufferings have caused a period of amnesia, with occasional flashes of painful recollection, as in the scene in which he hears of the discovery of a stone marked D I G in a cell in the Tower of London. We never know, by the way, whether his recollection at this moment is complete and whether he has, even furtively, any recall of the existence of the document of denunciation found by M. Defarge. The aspects of conscious and repressed memory are here handled with great skill by Dickens. Generally, his amnesia is reciprocal; he cannot recall his normal life during the period of relapse, or vice versa, especially when his relapses are triggered by events and disclosures which bring up memories of his old wrongs. His reversion to shoemaking for a short time after Charles proposes marriage to Lucie and again for a longer time following Lucie's marriage and Charles's final revelation of his long-suspected identity foreshadow the great disclosure which is to make him the unwitting aggressor against the happiness of his loving and beloved daughter.

When we consider Dr. Manette's conduct, however, we find that, whether Dickens consciously intended it to be or not, the doctor of Beauvais is a good psychiatrist, at least in the handling of his own illness. His shoemaking is superficially pictured as a symptom of mental regression and decay, but in its inception it must have been a sign of rebellion against madness rather than a symptom thereof. He relates that he begged for permission to make shoes as a means of diverting his mind from its unendurable suffering. Shoemaking, truly an example of vocational therapy, was the only contact with reality that his distracted mind, otherwise cut off from reality, possessed. It was, therefore, a means of bringing about his recovery. Lucie fears the shoemaking, but she realizes that her loving presence, coupled with the availability, if needed, of the vocational contact with reality, will serve to draw him back to normal adjustment. It would seem, then, that the act of Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross, carried on furtively and guiltily, of destroying his shoemaker's bench and tools after his spontaneous recovery from the attack following Lucie's wedding, was a great error, an error against which the doctor, giving an opinion in the anonymous presentation of his own case by Mr. Lorry, strongly advises. For when he once again falls into a state of amnesia and confusion, after the realization of the damage he has done to Charles and his impotence to remedy that damage, he calls for his bench and tools, but they are no longer to be had, and he huddles in a corner of the coach leaving Paris, a pitiful picture of mental decay from which we can see no hope of recovery despite the optimistic vision of Carton's last moments.

The basic aim of this paper has been, of course, psychological interpretation; but the psychological critic has sometimes been accused of neglecting the critical function of evaluation, and possibly a few concluding words might be added on that score.

What about the creative state? In it a man is taken out of himself. He lets down, as it were, a bucket into the unconscious and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach. He mixes this thing with his normal experience and out of the mixture he makes a work of art.… After this glance at the creative state, let us look at the critical. The critical state has many merits, and employs some of the highest and subtlest faculties of man. But it is grotesquely remote from the state responsible for the works it affects to expound. It does not let buckets down into the unconscious. It does not conceive in sleep or know what it has said after it has said it. Think before you speak, is criticism's motto; speak before you think is creation's. Nor is criticism disconcerted by people arriving from Porlock; in fact it sometimes comes from Porlock itself.

What Mr. Forster has set forth can best be understood in the light of the road which has been taken by psychological, particularly psychoanalytic, criticism in the more than twenty years which have elapsed since the delivery of that lecture in 1947. The psychoanalytic critic of today would like to think that he comes from Xanadu rather than Porlock. He cannot claim that he consistently writes before he thinks, but his thinking is to some extent based on material which the bucket lowered into the depths has brought up for him.

What can he say about the permanent literary value of the work which he is discussing? He cannot of course undertake to give any absolute final judgment; it will hardly be suitable for him to do what so many academic critics do, that is, to report the state of critical opinion in the "in-group" that usually passes critical judgment in academic circles. I have suggested elsewhere that the function of the psychoanalytic critic in evaluation is to prognosticate rather than to judge. I can do no better than to quote here my preferred authority, Norman Holland [as quoted from The Dynamics of Literary Response, 1968]:

Saying a literary work is "good," then, from the point of view of our model, is predicting that it will pass the test of time; that it "can please many and please long"; that it is a widely satisfying form of play; or, more formally, that it embodies a fantasy with a power to disturb many readers over a long period of time and, built in, a defensive maneuver that will enable those readers to master the poem's disturbance.

A Tale of Two Cities does, it seems to me, give every indication, even apart from its past history, that it "can please many and please long." Its use of the dynamic scapegoat pattern with the employment of the pattern of multiple projection, which it has been my aim to point out in this essay, does indeed embody a fantasy, a fantasy which was disturbing to Dickens and is still undoubtedly disturbing to many readers, and has used that device of multiple projection as the defensive maneuver that enables readers to master that disturbance. In that sense, there seems to be little doubt about the continuance of the perennial popularity of this often maligned but still frequently read novel of Dickens' later period.

But all of that is really by the way. Criticism of the kind which I have attempted is designed to furnish information rather than critical judgment, even of a prognostic nature; it is the kind of criticism which was described by Arthur Symons in his introduction to the Biographia Literaria of Coleridge:

The aim of criticism is to distinguish what is essential in the work of a writer. It is the delight of the critic to praise; but praise is scarcely part of his duty…. What we ask of him is that he should find out for us more than we can find out for ourselves.
A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens was in a driven demoniac state of mind when the idea for *A Tale of Two Cities* came to him. The bracelet he sent to Ellen Lawless Ternan had fallen into the hands of his wife Kate; and he was determined to end his marriage and to seduce Ellen. But he was in the midst of the rehearsals which had finally brought himself and Ellen together; and he could not pause to think. Amid Kate's tears, Forster's disapproval and a generally unnerving situation, he carried on in his furious possessed fashion, determined to have his own way and yet to keep his hold on the public; and in the midst of this spiritually and physically racked condition, as he was holding back his agony of mind by acting and producing *The Frozen Deep*, the central idea of the novel burst upon him.

So much we know from his own statement. It is clear then that we should be able to find the imprint of his ordeal, his tormented choice, in the novel. One would expect writers on his work to concentrate on this problem; but so abysmally low is the standard of Dickens criticism that no one has even seriously raised the question at all.

Where then is the imprint of the situation to be traced? By solving this point we can begin to understand what the novel itself is about, and the part it plays in Dickens' development. One general aspect of the selection of theme is at once obvious. The deep nature of the breach he is making with all customary acceptances is driving him to make a comprehensive effort to grasp history in a new way. So far (except for *Barnaby Rudge*) he has been content to use certain symbols to define his sense of basic historical conflict and movement. Yet all the while the influence of Carlyle, both in his *French Revolution* and his prophetic works like *Past and Present*, has been stirring him with the need for a direct statement of the historical issue as well as a symbolic one; and now, as he is coming close to a full confrontation of his opposition to all ruling Victorian values, he feels the need to set his story of conflicting wills in a manifestly revolutionary situation: that on which he had so long pondered as holding the clue to the crisis of his own world.

He had read and re-read Carlyle's history, till its theme and material were richly present in his mind; and now he wrote to the master asking for a loan of the cited authorities. The story goes that Carlyle jokingly sent him all his reference-books, 'about two cartloads.' And in the novel's preface Dickens wrote:

> It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book.

But though this need to make a general reconsideration of the nature of historical movement and change was certainly central in the impulse that Dickens felt, he had to fuse the overt theme with a more immediately personal nexus of emotion and imagery before it could take full grip of him. In the midst of his domestic misery and frenzied play-acting he did not feel simply an intellectual need to revalue history. The desire to break through obstructions and to mate with Ellen could turn into the desire to write about the French Revolution only if some image or symbol made him feel a basic coincidence between his own experience and the Revolution. What then was this image?

It was that of the Imprisoned Man in the Bastille. The Lost Man who has been jailed so long that he has become an automaton of oppressed misery; who has forgotten even the source of his wrong, the cause of his dehumanizing misery; who needs to break out of the deadly darkness of stone in order to become human again, to learn the truth and regain love.

Here then is the core of the novel. The originally-intended title was *Recalled to Life*. Though Dickens dropped this for the whole novel, he kept it for the first part, and it expressed the originating emotion of the story. A
*Tale of Two Cities* is built up from the episode of Dr. Manette's unjust imprisonment; and its whole working-out is concerned with the effects of that unjust deprivation of light and joy: effects which entangle everyone round the Doctor and recoil back on his own head in unpredictable ways. The Doctor's fate is thus for Dickens both a symbol of the Revolution, its deeds, causes, and consequences, and of himself, immured in a maddening cell of lies and cruelties, and seeking to break through into the truth, into a full and happy relationship with his fellows. It was the demented sense of environing pressures, of an unjust inescapable mechanism, which caught Dickens up in the midst of his wild mumery and gave him a sense of release when he determined to write the novel.

It has been pointed out (by T. A. Jackson) that there is a close underlying similarity between the plot of *A Tale* and that of *Little Dorrit* (the preceding novel in which Dickens had at last fully marshalled his condemnation of Victorian society). Both Dorrit and Manette are imprisoned for a score of years; both are released by forces outside their control and then continue tormented by their jail-experience. Dorrit is haunted by fear of social exposure, which comes finally in the collapse of Merdle (the exposure of the theft basic in the economic system). Dorrit thus from one angle embodies Dickens's deep fears of the past, fears of being exposed, fears of being driven back on the terrible moment of loss which therefore threatens to return in exacerbated form. He also embodies the bad conscience of a whole society which dares not contemplate truly its origins. But in Manette the symbolism goes much deeper. The experience of oppressive misery has not merely twisted him, as it twisted Dorrit; it has broken down the whole system of memory in his psyche. The problem then is: What can restore consciousness? What can connect the upper and the hidden levels of the mind again? Manette is kept going by a blind exercise of the craft learned in the cell of oppression, and only the intrusion of events from the Revolution can bring him back to an active consciousness and release him from his obsession. But the drama of objectifying in action the pattern of memory, the repetition-compulsion which must be broken, inevitably brings its shocks, its apparent evocation of forces as destructive as those working from the traumatic level. The test lies in the way that evocation is faced, the way it works out. So Manette finds that the bitterness engendered by his sufferings as an innocent wronged man has tangled him up in a net (inside a larger reference of social action and reaction, guilt and innocence) from which escape is possible only after a great sacrifice has been made. The old must die for the new to be born; man cannot attain regeneration without accepting its sacrificial aspect. In the story this appears in the struggle between Darnay and Carton for Manette's daughter, and the solution that mates Darnay and the girl, yet sends Carton to a regeneration in death.

In this dire tangle of moral consequences we see Dickens confronting his own confused situation and trying to equate his own moment of painful compelled choice with the revolutionary moment in which a definite break is made with the old, amid violent birthpangs, and makes possible the rebirth of life, the renewal of love and innocence.

The lacerated and divided state of Dickens's emotions at this moment of choice is revealed by the device of having two heroes who are practically twins in appearance and who love the same girl. Both Carton and Darnay are generous fellows, but one is morally well-organized, the other is fecklessly a misfit. The latter, however, by his devoted death reaches the same level of heroic generosity as his rival; indeed goes higher. His gesture of renunciation completes the ravages of the Revolution with its ruthless justice, and transforms them into acts of purification and redemption, without which the life of renewed love would not be possible.

Thus, in the story, Dickens gets the satisfaction of nobly giving up the girl and yet mating with her. He splits himself in the moment of choice, dies, and yet lives to marry the beloved, from whom the curse born out of a tainted and divided society is at last removed. And at the same time he is Manette, the man breaking out of a long prison-misery, who seeks only truth and justice, and whose submerged memory-drama projects itself as both the Carton-Darnay conflict and the socially-impinging dilemma that disrupts and yet solves that conflict.
There are thus a number of ambivalences in the story; and Dickens shows himself divided in his attitude to the Revolution itself. His petty-bourgeois fear of mass-movements is still alive; but the fascination of such movements, which stirred so strongly in *Barnaby*, is even keener than the fear. On the one hand he clings to the moral thesis to defend the Revolution: the Old Regime was vilely cruel and bestialized people, it could not but provoke excesses in return as the bonds slipped. But this thesis, to which Carlyle had sought to give a grandiose religious tang, now merges for Dickens with a deeper acceptance:

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 license and oppression over again and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.

Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilets of flaring Jezebels, the churches that are not my Father's house but dens of thieves, the huts of millions of starving peasants.

This passage begins with the simple moral statement; but the tumbrils, conjured up as mere counterpoises to the feudal carriages, become emblems of a great purification sweeping away the reign of the old iniquity. They express a ruthless transformation of society and are far more than an allegory of cruel tit-for-tat. Rather, they appear as forces of triumphant righteousness.

Throughout the book there runs this ambivalent attitude to the Revolution, shuddering, yet inclining to a deep and thorough acceptance. Not a blank-cheque acceptance, but one based on the subtle dialectics of conflict revealed by the story of Manette. For that story, symbolizing the whole crisis and defining its tensions in the depths of the spirit, makes a serious effort to work out the process of change, the rhythms of give-and-take, the involved struggles with their many inversions and opposed refractions, the ultimate resolution in death and love, in the renewal of life.

The working-out of the clash of forces is in fact more thoroughly done than in any previous work of Dickens. The weakness lies in the comparative thinness of characterization. The strain of grasping and holding intact the complex skein of the story is too much for Dickens at this difficult moment of growth. But his instinct is, as always, right. He needed this strenuous effort to get outside himself: no other way could he master the difficult moment and rebuild his foundations. After it he could return to the attack on the contemporary world with a new sureness, with new thews of drama, with new breadths of comprehension. The great works, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, were made possible. (I am not here dealing with those works; but it is interesting to note that the imprisonment-theme finds its completion in the contrasted and entangled themes of Miss Havisham and the old convict, the self-imposed prison of the traumatic moment and the socially-imposed prison of the criminal impulse, both merging to express the compulsions of an acquisitive society.)

*A Tale* is not a successful work like the two novels that followed it, but they would never have been written without it. An inner strain appears in the rigidity of tension between the thematic structure and the release of character-fantasy. Such persons as Manette, however, show a new persistence of psychological analysis, and the Defarges show what untapped sources of dramatic force Dickens could yet draw on. The final falsification of the book's meaning came about through the melodrama based on its material, in which the emphasis put on Carton sentimentalized away all the profundities.

Lucie is meant to represent Ellen Ternan; but at this stage Dickens knows very little about the real Ellen, and Lucie is therefore a stock-heroine. Charles Darnay, the winning lover, has the revealing initials *Charles D*. Dickens with his love of name-meanings can seldom resist leaving at least one or two such daydream-admissions among the names of a novel. Ellen was acting as Lucy in *The Frozen Deep* at the time
when the novel's idea came.
