
A CONTRASTING OUTLOOK ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION WITH THE NOVELS OF A TALE OF TWO CITIES AND THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

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ABSTRACT

“A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens, and “The Scarlet Pimpernel” by Baroness Orczy are both fictional tales that use the French Revolution, specifically the period of the “Reign of Terror” as a backdrop. The authors have taken a contrasting approach in the portrayal of the aristocracy and the revolutionaries. Charles Dickens, born in England, lived his childhood in poverty. In his novel, he is largely sympathetic towards the ideals of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”, offering an unbiased criticism of the excesses of both the revolutionaries and the nobility. During Baroness Orczy’s childhood, she had to flee her wealthy and posh lifestyle in fear of the peasant revolution. Her views on the Revolution remains unabashedly on the side of the nobility while being severely critical of the bloodbath unleashed by the guillotine. The contrasting outlook of the Revolution in the said novels remains a point of contention even today. This paper attempts to highlight the differing approaches by the authors in analyzing the French Revolution during the Reign of Terror. The main objective will be to ascertain the outlook on the exact notion of the French Revolution that got lost in the process of validating equality through violence, through the novels, thereby giving an insight into the ideals and inception of the French Revolution.

Keywords: French Revolution, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Peasantry, Democracy, Morality, Violence, Oppression

INTRODUCTION

The two novels are historical fictions, with a strikingly varied view of the French Revolution.

“A Tale of Two Cities” begins with,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”

thereby setting an atmosphere of uncertainty and precariousness that lasts throughout the novel. Dickens highlights the different perspectives of the French Revolution. The ordinary people, driven by ages of mistreatment and injustice, calls for an action against the aristocracy. Charles Dickens uses the incident of the peasant’s fanatical behavior over the spilled wine on the pavement to highlight the desolate and poverty-stricken conditions of the people. He also portrays the arrogance of the aristocracy, with the example of an aristocrat who has more than three servants working under him for merely serving chocolates. Dickens uses sarcasm to bring out the pomp and galore of the aristocracy’s ignorance. The novel uses the theme of “Resurrection” in two aspects; through Sydney Carton, a lawyer who sacrifices himself for Lucie Manette and is “reborn” in the hearts for whom he died for, and, in signifying the collapse of the monarchical regime. The theme of “Sacrifice” runs parallel to that of the former, where Carton’s selfless act of taking the place of Charles Darney, Lucie Manette’s husband, at the Guillotine, after Charles was accused of being the descendant of a cruel aristocrat, becomes pivotal to the narrative. These themes are intertwined with the themes of ‘violence’, ‘bloodshed’, and ‘class and societal differences’ which were the paradigms on which the Revolution emphasized on. The theme of Class provides a crucial aspect in assessing the complexity of morality as Dickens portrays the atrocities committed by the ignorant aristocracies and the brutal offenses committed by the revolutionaries in trying to establish their notion of freedom.

“The Scarlet Pimpernel” begins with a rather crude depiction of the Revolution, with the revolutionaries being described as,

“...savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and of hate.”

which sets the tone of the author throughout the novel. Her initial depiction of the revolutionaries further validates her stance on almost disregarding the movement. She sympathizes with the aristocracy. The novel's protagonist is Percy Blakeney, who is introduced

as a dull, wealthy English Baronet who indulges in a dandyish lifestyle and is estranged from his wife. The novel focuses on the exploits of the infamous “League of the Scarlet Pimpernel” headed by the enigmatic Scarlet Pimpernel, whose daring efforts to rescue aristocrats from the revolt have left people curious to know his identity. It is only revealed later that Percy is the Scarlet Pimpernel. His dullness was nothing but a pretence, a trait that was quite believable at the time as the nobility has been described in the novel as living a relatively ignorant and pompous lifestyle. The flower left behind by The Pimpernel is a small red wayside flower that does not stand out and often blends in the surroundings. This becomes symbolic of Percy’s traits as a baronet to that of his secret identity. While romance forms a central theme to the novel, the themes of violence, redemption, and the constant references to the Nobility versus the Masses is parallel to the central theme.

A BRIEF CHRONICLE OF THE REVOLUTION

The Revolution was a drastic socio-economic change in France. It began with the “Estates-General of 1789”. France’s society was segregated into three sections, the ‘Clergy’, the ‘Nobility’, and the ‘Commons’ with the latter comprising almost ninety-five percent of the population, but were not given any power for representation. Increased taxation on the already crumbling economy of the ‘commons’ led to the Tennis Court Oath that promised reforms.¹ After failing to keep the promises, the peasants broke into the prison, Bastille, that was symbol of royal tyranny, that took place in July 1789. This was followed by the drafting of the new constitution that established the “Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen” that appertained on the ideals of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” that is “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” The King and Queen were also apprehended after an unsuccessful attempt to escape the revolt.² Subsequent wars with France by neighboring countries affected the already dwindling economy. This led to counter-revolutions, and its lowest point being the execution of the French monarchy and ultimately the period of “Reign of Terror.”³

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of the researcher is to critically approach the facts and opinions of the Revolution, as depicted in the novels. An unbiased and comprehensive analysis of the Revolution will be

¹ WILLIAM DOYLE, THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 106 (2nd ed. 2002).

² Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Origins, Causes, and Extension of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon*, 18 JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY 771, 780 (1988), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/204824>.

³ WILLIAM DOYLE, THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 252 (2nd ed. 2002).

done to ensure its detailed depiction in history, and in its fictional depiction by the authors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the research paper will be analytical and descriptive. The paper will summarize both the novels, with an extensive detailing of the depiction of the French Revolution as the backdrop. The researcher, through the paper, will delve into the history of the Revolution, thereby ensuring an elaborate detailing on the backdrop that is used in the novels which will be done using authentic journal articles and textbooks as references.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After a preliminary research, the researcher has stumbled upon various pieces of literature that extensively deals with the topic the researcher has chosen.

“The Oxford History of the French Revolution” by William Doyle provides a detailed timeline of the events that led to the French Revolution, thus giving an informative understanding to the backdrop presented in the novels. It outlines the history of France from the Revolution to the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, broadly and comprehensively. The journal articles, *“The Origins, Causes, and Extension of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon”* by Gunther E. Rothenberg and *“The Outbreak of the French Revolution”* by George E. Rudé, gives an exhaustive understanding of the events that led to the French Revolution, focusing on the aristocracy, French Monarchy, and the poverty-stricken condition of the ordinary people. This provides a better understanding of the plight of the peasantry mentioned in *The Tale of Two Cities*, and the monarchy in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

The paper, *“The Consequences of Radical Reform: The French Revolution”* and the article, *“Amalgamating the Social in the French Revolution”*, gives an insight into the consequences of an oppressed method of establishing equality while crippling the aristocratic privilege through violent tactics. It draws an objective analysis by taking references from opposing works of notable political theorists and philosophers that view the Revolution through multiple perspectives.

The papers, *“Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in A Tale of Two Cities”* by J. M. Rignall, and *“Dickens's Attitudes in A Tale of Two Cities”* by Sylvere Monod critically describes Charles Dickens approach and subtlety in divulging the atrocities of the

disadvantaged sections of society. Drawing an analysis using Dicken's prominent characters like David Copperfield and Oliver Twist, the papers help provide an analytical approach. While setting the stage of his novels with the backdrops of prisons, slums and orphanages may be grim and brooding, this allowed Dickens to shed light on the conditions of the destitute state of the people in the society. This critical approach of the paper provides an insight into Charles Dicken's cautious and an almost repugnant tone used in the novel.

ANALYSIS

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AS DEPICTED IN HISTORY

The "*Age of Enlightenment*" that is attributed to have begun in the year 1715, consisted of ideas and philosophies that was gaining rapid prominence in the French society.⁴ The ideas and thoughts of this period was the root causation for people to question and dispute the Monarchy's right to rule over the people, the authority of the Church over politics, and the existing unfair hierarchical structure of the society.

The French Revolution of 1789 had far-reaching consequences. The Revolution had violently toppled the established regime that involved radical changes, including reducing the unchecked power and control of the clergy and nobility, and putting an end to the system of feudalism⁵. The revolutionaries professed a universal ideology of rights of man, a radical idea at the time, as it opposed religious dogmatism and monarchical authority, with the ideology of freedom, equality and fraternity at its core. The clash in the implications and desirability of these radical ideas are debated even today.

The Revolution was considered as a major turning point in world history because of the progressive ideas that took seed and spread. Feudalism and old social fissures were abrogated to give way to a system that was meant to judge all people equally.⁶ When the Revolution first began, reactions abroad tended to be a mixture of fascination and horror. The ideas of the new constitution, wherein the absolute rule of the monarchy was infringed and the rule was predominantly in favor of the people, began to influence the neighboring countries that were

⁴ FRENCH REVOLUTION, <https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution> (last visited Jan 9, 2022).

⁵ Daron Acemoglu, Davide Cantoni, Simon Johnson, James A. Robinson, *The Consequences of Radical Reform: The French Revolution* 3 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 14831, 2009), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14831>.

⁶ *supra* note 4

mostly monarchical.⁷ The ideology of “*equality before law*” were widely supported by the liberals. However, as more news and reports about the blatant violence and bloodshed that was occurring, the opposition to the Revolution increased. There were contradicting views on the meaning of rights and the legitimacy of revolution.

Most philosophers who supported the ideals of the revolution, had similar notions on personal liberty and autonomy, an abhorrence to corruption, and a disregarding commentary on the aristocracy. Thomas Paine, a prominent political theorist, supported the right of the French people to override the dominating monarchy; he commended the Revolution as being the “*harbinger of freedom and equality*” in his book, “*The Rights of Man*”. He stated,

*“It was . . . against the despotic principles of the government, that the nation revolted. These principles had . . . become too deeply rooted to be removed, and the Augean stable of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything short of a complete and universal revolution”*⁸

Other theorists, however, saw it as a universal attack on the crown, the church and the aristocracy. In “*Reflections on the Revolution in France*”, philosopher Edmund Burke, vehemently condemned the Revolution due to its utter chaos and brutality. Thus, what began as an inaugural bow to freedom from oppression, concerned thinkers believed it ended as a “*grim historical precedent; an ideologically motivated attempt to annihilate an entire class of people.*”⁹

CONTRASTING LOOK OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION IN THE NOVELS

Charles Dickens highlighted the pitiful condition of the peasants through their fervent behaviour over the spilt wine;

*“Some men kneeled down, made scoops of their two hands joined, and sipped...even with handkerchiefs from women's heads, which were squeezed dry into infants' mouths...”*¹⁰

The author maintains a sympathetic stance to the revolutionaries, all the while portraying the

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Daron Acemoglu, Davide Cantoni, Simon Johnson, James A. Robinson, *The Consequences of Radical Reform: The French Revolution* 5 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 14831, 2009), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14831>.

⁹ Richard Bernstein, *The French Revolution: Right or Wrong?*, N. Y. TIMES (July 10, 1988), <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/10/books/the-french-revolution-right-or-wrong.html>.

¹⁰ CHARLES DICKENS, *A TALE OF TWO CITIES* 25 (Chapman & Hall 1859).

bloodshed and violence, with mentioning the La Guillotine as the symbol of violent tactics used by the revolutionaries. The beginning lines of the concluding chapter, concise his reflections on the revolutionaries;

“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.”¹¹

For centuries, the peasants have been under the oppressive and authoritative rule of the monarchy and aristocracy, that riddled them with a dilapidated economy. The revolution against this unjust treatment took a violent turn as the peasants try to assert their philosophy of equality, liberty and fraternity, that was met with strong opposition. Feelings of detest and despise due to the years of tyranny and subjugation, the revolution against the aristocracy and monarchy took the same path as the oppression on peasants. The author, while celebrating the ideals of the revolution, and commiserating the sorry state of the peasants, condemns the vicious and frenzied tactics used by the oppressed on their oppressors. Thus, Charles Dickens alternates between sympathy and horror in his depiction of the Revolution. Baroness Orczy is neither empathetic nor supportive of the movement against the aristocracy and the monarchy, since its inception. She unapologetically sides with the aristocracy and sympathises with the deposed nobles and the old hierarchical order, as depicted in the lines,

“...that relentless and stern France which was exacting her pound of flesh, the blood-tax from the noblest of her sons.”¹²

In a time, when most literary works more often than not, showcased the struggles of the peasantry and their conditions, Baroness Orczy has evidently highlighted the aristocracy and monarchy as the protagonists of the story, and the revolutionaries as the antagonists who are “only human in nature.” A key theme that emerges, is an intrinsic tie between the traits of valiance and heroism to the aristocrats and the monarchy. The varied characteristics that encompasses of what constitutes a hero, are shown to be naturally imbibed in the noble class. Orczy, being a baroness herself who had to leave her lavish lifestyle fearing the revolution at her home, makes no qualms in displaying her support. In order to garner empathy for the aristocrats and the monarchy, however, she makes the trajectory of the story in such a way, to

¹¹ CHARLES DICKENS, A TALE OF TWO CITIES 325 (Chapman & Hall 1859).

¹² BARONESS ORCZY, THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL (Greening 1908).

exhibit only the bloodthirsty and vicious nature of the revolutionaries. Thus, Baroness Orczy, followed a one-sided trajectory that focussed only on the atrocities committed by the peasants.

SYMBOL OF GUILLOTINE IN THE NOVELS

The guillotine is often associated with the French Revolution as the main method of execution for all those who did not comply with the ideals of the revolutionaries.

The guillotine is viewed as the symbol that equalizes the oppressors with the oppressed and both the authors have taken a similar stance in describing the guillotine.

“...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.”¹³

“...snatching the lives of men, women, and even children from beneath the very edge of that murderous, ever-ready Madame la Guillotine.”¹⁴

The guillotine, is thereby, clearly indicated as a “symbol of fear and violence” which broods over the aristocrats, the monarchy, and even the citizens who do not follow the ideals as put forth by the revolutionaries. The vicious tactics used by the revolutionaries, showcases the blind hatred of the peasantry for the blue-blooded privileged, who claimed social and economic superiority over them.

CONCLUSION

The different approaches taken by the authors in the novel remain a point of disagreement even today. Be that as it may, the ideologies and radical ideas of the Revolution; freedom of religion, abolition of hereditary privilege, equality before law, an end to the oppressive feudal system, had its inception with the fundamental intention of putting an end to the tyranny and authoritative regime in the French society. However, as put forth by the authors, these paragon ideologies got lost in the process of validating equality through oppression and violence, and led to years of turmoil and bloodshed. Thus, the concluding dominating antics of the monarchy and aristocracy that were repulsed by the oppressed, ultimately led to the vicious cycle being repeated by the same oppressed, over their oppressors.

¹³ CHARLES DICKENS, A TALE OF TWO CITIES 240 (Chapman & Hall 1859).

¹⁴ BARONESS ORCZY, THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL (Greening 1908).

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