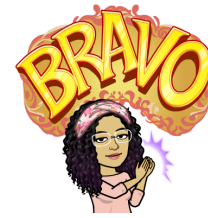


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Great Books of the Modern Age

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Here We Go Again

“And a beautiful world we live in, when it is possible, and when many other such things are possible, and not only possible, but done- done you see!- under that sky there, every day. Long live the Devil” (31). So says the facetious Ernest Defarge in Charles Dickens' masterpiece, *A Tale of Two Cities*, written in 1859, as he describes the atrocities of the French aristocracy. Defarge is one of many characters that people grow to love – and hate – throughout the story, along with Lucie Manette, Doctor Manette, Sydney Carton, Madame Defarge, Miss Pross, and Jerry Cruncher. *A Tale of Two Cities* follows the course of the Manette family as they are caught up in the French Revolution and the madness that follows, introducing characters that become friends and enemies to the beloved family. With a book that has become one of the best-selling novels of all time, Dickens uses expressive imagery and relatable characters to show how oppression creates a cycle that affects everybody.

Dickens uses vivid imagery to show how oppression creates a cycle that affects everybody. In the streets of San Antoine, the people are starved and dying, desperate for anything to ease the pain of living. Dickens describes a scene “when the wine was gone, and the places where it had been most abundant were raked into a gridiron-pattern by fingers, these demonstrations ceased, as suddenly as they had broken out” (33) and “now that the cloud settled on San Antoine, which a momentary gleam had driven from his sacred countenance, the darkness of it was heavy – cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance, and want, were the lords in waiting on the saintly presence – nobles of great power all of them; but, most especially the last” (33). The people of San Antoine and indeed all of France, are starving, sick, cold, dying. The spilling of the wine cask gives them a momentary escape from the clutches of poverty, but all too soon

it's gone, and they once more face the life that they have been given. Dickens describes the scene expressively, so clearly that you can see it in your mind. The people of France are suffering under oppression, and Dickens makes it clear with the way he writes his tale. Dickens also uses vivid imagery to show how oppression, via La Guillotine, affects everybody as the Revolution ensues. Dickens also describes the horror of the guillotine and how it affects everybody:

Every day, through the stony streets, the tumbrils now jolted heavily, filled with
Condemned. Lovely girls, bright women, brown-haired, black-haired and gray;
youths; stalwart men and old; gentle born and peasant born; all red wine for La
Guillotine, all daily brought into light from the dark cellars of the loathsome
prisons, and carried to her through the streets to slake her devouring thirst.
Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death;- the last, much easiest to bestow, O
Guillotine! (246)

The Guillotine, the newest weapon of execution, affects everybody, whether or not they're actually guilty or deserve what they're getting. The citizens of France are so hungry for revenge on the nobles who caused them so much pain that they are taking out their wrath on anyone. The people start punishing people who haven't done anything, such as Darnay, simply because they are related to the nobles, or such as the Manettes, whose only connection is Lucy's marriage to Charles. With vivid imagery, Dickens paints clear pictures in everyone's minds of the tragic events that show that oppression creates a cycle that affects everybody.

Dickens also uses relatable characters to show how oppression creates a cycle that affects everybody. Perhaps the saddest character in all of *A Tale of Two Cities* is Sydney Carton, who is the most heart-wrenching character in the whole story. Carton is a clever lawyer who works with his partner Stryver, another, less clever lawyer. Carton is an orphan who has struggled with depression and drinking his whole life.

Sydney Carton had never really experienced love or happiness till the Manettes came into his life. And even then, he still cannot pull himself out of his sad old life, still finding brief comfort in wine. Everybody has felt unloved or depressed at times, and readers can't help but sympathize with the downcast Carton, hoping that he'll be able to find happiness with the Manette family. But as the book ends, and readers watch Carton give his life for the Manette family's happiness, to give his life to save Charles, someone he originally disliked, they begin to see a trait of selflessness and sacrifice that Carton has displayed a few times before then. For example, he confesses his love for Lucy but takes joy in her happiness with Charles:

No man ever really loved a woman, lost her, and knew her with a blameless though an unchanged mind, when she was a wife and a mother, but her children had a strange sympathy with him - and instinctive delicacy of pity for him. What fine hidden sensibilities are touched in such a case, no echoes tell; but it is so, and it was so here. Carton was the first stranger to whom little Lucy held out her chubby arms, and he kept his place with her as she grew. The little boy had spoken of him, almost at the last. 'Poor Carton! Kiss him for me!' (188)

The oppressive regime of the Revolution forces Sydney into action to help Charles, and he ends up taking his place to die. However, he actually is satisfied with his end, knowing that it allows the Manettes to start a new life somewhere, and he says that it's "a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known" (351). Lucy Manette, from the very beginning of the story, is shown to be a loving, compassionate, sweet character, with a bright and kind personality, but that doesn't make her free from the grasp of the Revolution. When her husband is falsely accused and arrested,

She did not greatly alter her appearance. The plain dark dresses, akin to mourning dresses, which she and her child wore, were as neat and as well attended to as the brighter clothes of happier days. She lost her color, and the old and intent expression was a constant, not an occasional thing; otherwise, she

remained very pretty and comely. Sometimes, at night on kissing her father, she would burst into grief she had repressed all day, and would say that her sole reliance, under Heaven, was on him. (276-247)

Oppression has a foothold in Lucie's life from the very beginning, starting with her father being taken from her as a child because of the crimes of the Evremonde family, then with her husband being accused twice and finally sentenced to death, and then ending with the death of a dear friend. Though her husband is saved, it costs the life of a friend, a friend whom she never forgets (336). Through the characters and hardships of Lucie and Sydney, Dickens shows that oppression creates a cycle that affects everybody.

Dickens uses expressive imagery and relatable characters to show how subjugation creates a pattern that affects everybody. Understanding the cycle of oppression is important because it shows how oppression for any reason is never okay. It works only off the backs of others, and it always ends in suffering for everyone, no matter how long it takes. When people who are oppressed rise up against their oppressors, they immediately place someone else in their place to be oppressed, as revenge for the wrongs they have endured. Unlike in math, however, two negatives don't make a positive in this case. Revolutions can be avoided if governments don't take advantage of the people's needs, but history has shown again and again that governments will exploit their people, and people will revolt. Not all revolutions end in a better government as the American Revolution did. Most end up like the French Revolution, in a lot of pain and death for everyone, regardless of what they have done. And when a new government is put in place, the circle begins again. And it is true, as Defarge says, that in such a beautiful world, such terrible things can and do happen, every day.