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Great Books of the Modern Age

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How does Dickens view oppression?

Should the oppressed take revenge by oppressing the oppressors, or should the oppressed show forgiveness? In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the author, Charles Dickens suggests both forgiveness and judgment should take place. But why would Dickens choose both? Dickens uses both because of the Christian perspective in this book. Jesus says one should forgive others who have wronged them, but that does not mean they do not still get judged. In the story, the year is 1789 and the aristocracy and the common citizens of France are about to start what will soon become known as the French Revolution. Due to being oppressed, the peasants and the middle class revolt against the aristocracy by raiding the Bastille. One family is caught up in the conflict of both the nobility and the common people. Dickens uses repetition and juxtaposition to emphasize that only true justice can end oppression.

Dickens uses repetition to show that only true justice can end oppression. As he describes the climate of England toward wrongdoers, Dickens is using sarcasm and repeats the word “put to death” to say that judgment needs to be discerned and the death penalty should not be the predominant choice. “Death is Nature's remedy for all things, and why not Legislations? 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” (47). Dickens is emphasizing that in those days the only way to judge someone is through death. The oppression in England is so harsh, even for the smallest of crimes. Dickens

also uses repetition of the words “put to death” to show that oppression is unjust, relentless and has no forgiveness. As Dickens uses the word “death” to illustrate the cold, hopeless, feeling of oppression in book 3 chapter 9, it appears as though true justice will never come. The day appears to be no better than the night due to the gloomy description of it “looking like a dead face out of the sky” (book 3, chapter 9). The following night reveals the moon and stars lacking brightness as though enslaved to death’s relentless grip. Without true justice, oppression will never be abolished. Each day will continue in a never-ending cycle of death. However, as Carton prepares to lay down his life for the innocent Darnay, Dickens hints at a brighter future where justice will counteract oppression through self-sacrifice.

“The night wore out, and, as he stood upon the bridge listening to the water as it splashed the river-walls 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.” (book 3 chapter 9)

The condition in Paris appears dire and dreadful because of the oppressive climate surrounding the French Revolution. Dickens continues to use the words “dead”, “died”, and “death” to symbolize the cruel nature of oppression. There remains a glimmer of hope through the actions of Sydney Carton, who will sacrifice his own life to rescue Charles Darnay. Dickens utilizes repetition to create emphasis on how justice must overcome oppression.

Dickens also uses juxtaposition to show how true justice outshines the doom of oppression. The following paragraph represents two different people who are opposite to each other: Charles Darnay, who has a successful life, and Sidney Carton, who has a hopeless life. Both of these characters reflect the back and forth swing between hopeful justice and the shadow of oppression.

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. (Dickens 1)

Dickens uses juxtaposition to show the contrast between an oppressive fate and redemptive future. This is reflected through the selfless actions of Carton as he intercepts Darnay's fate.

Sydney Carton feels as though he has no hope left but he knows Charles Darnay still has something worth living for. Carton's sacrifice points to how justice can be reached when one sacrifices themselves for the benefit of another. Juxtaposition also takes place in the characters of Lucie, who sees the good in people, and Madame Defarge, who sees only the dark side to everything after losing her family. As a result, Madame Defarge views oppression and death as the only suitable judgment for what the Evremonde family has done to her. "But, the Evremonde people are to be exterminated, and the wife and the child must follow the husband and father" (314). Madame Defarge is a vengeful person. She comes from a poor background, her sister is raped, her brother is stabbed, and her sister's husband is worked to death. Since she and her family have been oppressed, she views justice as carrying out revenge against her oppressors and opposers. On the other hand Lucie, by her display of kindness towards her father and Carton, believes that everyone deserves a second chance. She shows empathy by being there for her father as he paces back and forth with traumatic memories of his time in the Bastille. She shows forgiveness towards the injustice of her father's imprisonment for 18 years. This contrasts with Madame DeFarge's belief in retribution. The following scene reflects the juxtaposition of Madame DeFarge and Lucie's approaches to oppression:

That was all the writing. It was so much, however, to her who received it, that [Lucie] turned from Defarge to his wife, and kissed one of the hands that knitted. It was a passionate, loving, thankful, womanly action, but the hand made no response—dropped cold and heavy, and took to its knitting again. (Dickens page#))

True justice comes through forgiveness, like a warm kiss upon a cold hand. Madame Defarge doesn't feel like she should have mercy on others because the aristocracy didn't have mercy on her family. From her perspective, the only suitable judgment is death. Lucie, on the other hand, has a posture of forgiveness and thankfulness, which outshines Madame DeFarge's perspective. Dickens uses repetitive words and contrasting perspectives to demonstrate the unforgiving, eerie nature of oppression and to emphasize that only true justice can bring it to an end.

Charles Dickens utilizes repetition and juxtaposition to demonstrate that the resolution of oppression comes by way of valid fairness. These elements relating to oppression are key because forgiveness and judgment matter. Today, people may feel like there is no hope and it is every man for himself due to oppression appearing relentless and unforgiving. Oppressors cannot escape from judgment, because rejecting it will only make it worse. However, everyone deserves a second chance because no one is perfect. Should the oppressed take revenge by oppressing the oppressors, or should the oppressed show forgiveness? The oppressed should respond with both forgiveness and correct judgment so that the persecuted can show mercy and the oppressors can experience mercy.

Works Cited

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