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Great Book of the Modern Age

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Frantic, Manic, and Very Unromantic

If you ever thought the French were romantic, think again. During the Reign of Terror, the revolutionaries killed more people than Covid-19, and didn't even have the decency to wear a mask in the process (Not verified, just kidding!). After withstanding oppression for countless years, the French people finally revolted against their government, but ended up being just as oppressive in the process, killing thousands on the guillotine. Despite knowing first-hand how it felt on the powerless side, when given the opportunity to oppress their former rulers, the revolutionaries' zealous attitude drove them to the same cold-heartedness they had once complained about. In one of his most well-known works of literary genius, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens portrays the causes and effects of oppression in 18th-century England and France. From the handsome, successful Charles Darnay to the withered, forgotten Doctor Manette, Dickens creates unforgettable characters as he depicts typical European society during the French Revolution and the struggle between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. As this conflict continues, wine is slurped, boys are run over, and families are torn, but the underlying theme of oppression remains the same throughout. Amid the frantic, unromantic French Revolution, Dickens combines the use of characterization and expressive imagery to show that oppressing others deteriorates one's sense of compassion and empathy.

As the story unfolds, Dickens utilizes influential characters to show this lack of compassion in the personality of an oppressor. In a chilling scene, Dickens displays the inconsideracy of Monsieur Marquis to the death of a boy whom his carriage has run over. The people are aghast,

“Killed!” A man shrieks wildly, shocked and horrified at what has just happened. “Dead” (96)! However, the Marquis is indifferent to the life his carriage has just trampled and simply tosses a lone, gold coin into the crowd towards the boy’s father. His only remark is blatantly impassible, “It is extraordinary to me,” said he, “that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is forever in the way” (97). The Marquis is self-centered and greedy; whipping through the streets with “an inhuman abandonment of consideration” (96) for the innocent pedestrians, he has no regard for anyone but himself. With arrogant contempt for the blubbering commoners beneath him, he supplies money as restitution for the life he has carelessly taken. Where the bystanders recognize the seriousness of the situation, and are only hiding their grief out of fear for him, his reaction to the loss of life is cold and unempathetic, “lean[ing] back in his seat... with the air of a gentleman who had accidentally broken some common thing, and had paid for it, and could afford to pay for it” (97). In the same way, when the Marquis’s nephew, Charles Darnay comes to speak with his uncle about his plan to detach himself from his family’s opulent lifestyle, saying in a miserable tone, “I believe our name to be more detested than any name in France,” the Marquis’s remark is unquestionably cold. “Let us hope so,” the spoiled uncle returns tersely, continuing to assert that, “Detestation of the high is the involuntary homage of the low” (107). His attitude shows an obvious disparagement of the needs, cares, and concerns of “the low”, and that he only cares about being honored and respected by these little people, even involuntarily. Through the characterization of Monsieur the Marquis, Dickens conveys a distinct lack of empathy and compassion in the hearts of oppressors.

In addition, Dickens skillfully uses imagery to show the insensitivity in those who oppress others. In describing the château of Monsieur the Marquis, Dickens is expressing the personality of its owner; an oppressor as one of stone: hard and cold. “It was a heavy mass of building... with a large stone courtyard before it, and two stone sweeps of staircase meeting in a stone terrace before the principal door. A stony business altogether, with heavy stone balustrades,

and stone urns, and stone flowers, and stone faces of men, and stone heads of lions, in all directions" (103). This château of stone, with its chilling, unyielding exterior, seems to represent not only the Marquis's abode, but his very character. Just as stone is hard and reticent, those who oppress others are cold-hearted and stoic. As symbolized by the stone flowers, oppressors are unaffected and insensitive even where it is natural to be soft and delicate. They turn a blind eye to another's grief, and harden their hearts to sorrow. As he sits with his uncle, the Marquis, Charles Darnay expresses his hate for his aristocratic family line and his wish to renounce his rightful inheritance. While he points out that, instead of this wealth representing some great position in life, it only stands for oppression, his uncle apparently sees no problem with this. Darnay argues that "To the eye it is fair enough, here; but seen in its integrity... it is a crumbling tower of waste, mismanagement, extortion, debt, mortgage, oppression, hunger, nakedness, and suffering" (109). However, all his opulent uncle has to say in response is a well-satisfied "Hah!" The Marquis doesn't even seem to hear his nephew's complaints, much less acknowledge their truth. Hardheartedly, he simply laughs at this disparaging portrayal of his power and wealth. He is blind to the suffering he causes and deaf to any objections. Oppressing others is how he gets ahead in life and thrives in luxury; he cannot be compassionate because to feel compassion for other people would mean to recognise his own contribution to their miseries and to change his character. Dickens uses the images of Marquis's stony château and his destructive wealth to show that oppression breeds hardheartedness and that oppressors lack empathy for others.

As he gracefully unwinds *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens shows how an oppressive attitude leads to a lack of compassion, and desensitizes the oppressor to another's sorrow. Feeling empathy and showing compassion for others ensures that we are not constantly focused on ourselves and that we do not become oppressive towards our peers, elevating ourselves above them and considering our needs, desires, and aspirations as better than theirs. So, if the French plan on maintaining their identity as the hopeless romantics they are so often depicted as, they

should take a hint from the past and Charles Dickens, and be careful to not let the love of power overcome the power of love.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. 1859. The Reader's Digest Association, 1984.