Indira Gandhi National Open University
School of Humanities

BEGC-110
BRITISH LITERATURE: 19TH CENTURY

Block

1

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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BRITISH LITERATURE: 19TH CENTURY (BEGC110) COURSE INTRODUCTION

WELCOME STUDENTS!!

The Victorian age in English literature takes its name from Queen Victoria of Great Britain who ascended the throne in 1837, and was monarch until her death in 1901. However, when we talk of the Victorian Age, we have the period of 1830-1900 in mind. Hence, 1830 marks the beginning of the Victorian period in English literature.

The economic and political measures introduced by Queen Victoria, like ending the monopoly of merchants (the old laissez-faire policy), her fair and liberal steps in dealing with the British colonies, along with the progress made in the fields of commerce and industry made the Victorian age one of the best ages for the English people. However, there was a flip side to this scenario. The industrial progress brought in its wake, poverty, ugliness, squalor and injustice among the urban industrial workers. The worst crisis occurred in the realm of religion. So far, the advances of contemporary Science had not disturbed the Victorian mind. But the publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), shook the very foundations of Christianity. Darwin's theory of Natural Selection came in direct conflict with the *Book of Genesis*. This led to a spiritual crisis among the Victorians. It is important also to consider the position of women in the 19th century. There were several repressive forces constantly operating on women in the Victorian period. Women were not supposed to be opinionated. They were conventionally required to simply conform to the male line of thought. But on the other hand, again, a number of legislations enacted during the period also gave the right to divorce and inheritance to women.

To sum it up, the Victorian period symbolizes prosperity and progress on the one hand, and poverty and gloomy forebodings on the other; moralism and philanthropy on the one hand, and capitalistic greed and corruption on the other ; peace and contentment on the one hand, and an undercurrent of 'sick hurry and divided aims', on the other. This social divide in society, often referred to as 'Victorian Compromise', came to be observed in the novels of Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Meredith, Emily and Anne Bronte, Thomas Hardy and Mary Ann Evans (who wrote under the pseudonym George Eliot).

In **Block 1** of this course we will be taking up Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

In **Block 2** you will be studying another novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas hardy.

Blocks 3 and 4 deal with Victorian Poetry.

Two of the most important novelists of this period were Dickens and Hardy. Dickens was a recorder of the Victorian age, both celebrating and criticizing it. His novel *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with the lines-" 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 spring of hope, it was the winter of despair…"- which though speak of an earlier time (around the time of the French revolution of 1789) yet, Dickens writes from the historical perspective of his own times which saw a similar social and economic disparity.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of Hardy's famous 'Wessex' novels. It is set in the fictional town of Casterbridge which is Dorchester situated in the south-western region of England popularized by Hardy as ' Wessex' in his novels. It is possible to find elements of Greek tragedy in the novel and certain features that allow us to read the novel as psychological, social, historical and regional. The distinctive quality of Hardy's novels is that you can respond to them in all these different ways.

The great Victorian poets are undisputedly Tennyson, Browning and Matthew Arnold and each in his own way was influenced by the masters of the Romantic age. Early Tennyson was powerfully under the influence of Keats, in certain respects even excelling him. While Tennyson's first poems were Keatsian, Browning wrote the early poems under the spell of Shelley. Later, however, in breadth of vision, in its wider sympathies, in its greatest awareness of the social changes, Browning's poetry far outstrips the poetry of the Romantic poets. In his manipulation of the dramatic monologue, Browning has hardly anyone to match him. Matthew Arnold presents a much sober picture as compared to Tennyson. He, with his sympathy for the classical masters, could not love the more fiery ones among the Romantics. His ideal was Wordsworth.

Christina Georgina Rossetti (pseudonym Ellen Alleyne) was one of the most important 19th century English women poets both in range and quality. Haunted by an ideal of spiritual purity that demanded self- denial, Christina still had a passionate and sensuous temperament, a keen critical perception and a lively sense of humor. 'Goblin Market' is her best known poem and the two sisters in the poem, may be taken to represent the two sides of the poetess herself– self-denying and ascetic, and the other sensuous, hedonistic and self-indulgent.

G. M. Hopkins lived and wrote during the latter half of the Victorian period but his poetry was published only in 1918, posthumously. He is considered to be a herald of modernist poetry because of his daring innovations and experimentations in poetic language, technique and style. Subject wise, he is predominantly the product of his times. He praises the beauty and grandeur of God's creation, explores his spiritual tensions and investigates his relationship with God.

I hope you will enjoy studying this course as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first Block of your course on British Literature: 19th Century (BEGC-110).

Block 1 is devoted to the novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

In **Unit 1** we have provided you with a general introduction to the novel as well as introduced Dickens and his other works.

In **Unit 2** we have given you a detailed summary of *A Tale of Two Cities* along with critical comments to help you understand the events of the novels.

In **Unit 3** we have discussed the French Revolution as an actual historical event and we have also focused on Dickens' treatment of the French Revolution.

In **Unit 4** we have taken up some other important aspects of the novel which are important for you to understand.

We expect you to read the complete novel, as only then will you find our discussions meaningful.

All the best.

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UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION: *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, the material provided is chiefly of an introductory nature. Our aim through this Unit is to:

- place the text within the context of the writer's life, the times in which he lived, his other works, his other interests, and his major thematic preoccupations, as no text exists in isolation from its context.
- provide some knowledge of the French revolution, which was an actual historical event that Dickens used as background material for his novel.
- touch briefly on some features of the novel.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us begin by getting acquainted with the novel *A Tale of Two Cities.*

A Tale of Two Cities is divided into three books/parts. Book I begins with a chapter that specifies the historical period in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and the settings (England and France), of the novel. The narrative begins with the dangerous journey of Mr. Jarvis Lorry, an English banker, from England to Paris, accompanied by a young girl, Lucie Manette. In Paris they meet her father whom she has never seen before: Dr. Edward Manette, a prisoner of the Bastille now released after eighteen years of solitary confinement. He was kept hidden in a loft over the wine-shop of the Defarges. Manette is withdrawn and confused, and clings to his cobbler's bench and tools, which had given him solace in prison. He is gently persuaded to return to England with them.

Book II is given the title “The Golden Thread”. (You will have to consider whether this title is an appropriate one). The events narrated in this section cover a period of approximately nine years. The narrative begins at a point five years after the release of Dr. Manette, and ends with the onset of the Revolution and Charles Darnay's return to France soon after. The greater part of the twenty-four chapters in this section is set in London and centres around the residence of Dr. Manette in the Soho district. These chapters tell us of Dr. Manette's slow recovery, Lucie Manette's courtship by three men, her acceptance of Charles Darnay, and the happiness of this tranquil family set-up. But this account is interrupted every now and then by chapters set in France which remind us of the growing discontent of the poor and the threat of revolution in that country. These chapters tell us of the sins of the aristocracy, especially of the attitude and actions of the Marquis d'Evremonde (uncle of Charles Darnay), his murder, and the consequences of the act. Thus Book II both provides a contrast between the "home" (set in England), and the “nation” (the events in France), as well as shows us the interconnectedness of the two. Dickens wishes to convey a sense of inexorability or doom in the progress of events in both the stories.

Book III is set entirely in revolutionary France, and gives us vivid and entirely negative pictures of the French mob, such as their frenzied dances, their travestied trials, their bloodthirsty killings, their spying and plotting, and their avid enjoyment of the spectacle of the guillotine. In Book III, Dickens reinforces the pattern of violence and counter-violence, turning them into an almost autonomous process as if destined by some impersonal Fate rather than by human agents. We also note how Dickens resolves the triangular love-plot by arranging the sacrificial death of Carton, at the guillotine. The novel ends with his optimistic vision of the future, and his famous words of farewell.

1.2 CHARLES DICKENS: LIFE AND WORKS

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 at Portsea, England. His father was a naval pay clerk who was improvident and frequently in debt. When Dickens was eleven, family circumstances forced him to leave school and find employment in a blacking factory. His father was sent to the debtors' prison in Marshalsea. These were happenings that left a deep scar in his mind. He never forgot the humiliation of sinking into the working - class so suddenly, or the betrayal at being left to fend for himself. The deep sympathy of the child, and the protest against social injustices that we find in his work were born out of his childhood trauma.

After a few months, however, John Dickens was released and the young Charles was able to resume schooling. He started work in a law firm as clerk, became a legal reporter, and subsequently, due to his skill in shorthand, a newspaper reporter of parliamentary proceedings. As a journalist he wrote a number of short descriptive "sketches" of city life, which were so popular that they were collected into a book, entitled *Sketches by Boz* (1843). (Boz was the pen name adopted by Dickens). His first novel was the immensely popular comic novel *Pickwick Papers*. It was originally intended to serve merely as the text to accompany the sporting plates of the famous artist

Seymour, but due to the former's death, Dickens went on to write it as his own book.

Dickens' success as a novelist after this was swift. He wrote *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Nicholas Nickleby* almost simultaneously between 1837 and 1841. In these early novels Dickens attacked various contemporary social evils and called for their reform. *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), which came next, was one of his only two historical novels (the other being the much later *A Tale of Two Cities*). In 1842 he visited America with his wife (he had married Catherine Hogarth in 1836). *American Notes* (1848) was based on this visit. The novels of his "middle" period were *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844*),* The Christmas books including *Christmas Carol* (1843), *Dombey and Sons* (1848), and the autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1850).

Dickens' greatest novels were written, arguably, in the decade that followed: *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1857) are, like his last novels*, Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), great novels of social criticism. In these novels, Dickens is no longer attacking specific social ills, but is dealing with the issue of the "condition of England" itself through his satiric representation of such national institutions as the court of Chancery, the "Circumlocution Office", the factory system, the class system, the great financial schemes and money systems, and middle-class philistinism and jingoism.

In 1859 he wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, going back to the eighteenth century for his matter. In the 1850s Dickens was also editor successively of two immensely successful magazines. He was at the height of his success, and had become a man of great wealth and fame. In 1858 he began to give public readings from his books, which were very popular. But they proved to be a great physical strain, and he died following a stroke in 1870. He was buried in Westminster Abbey in the Poets' Corner, an honour reserved for the great English writers.

Dickens is the author of fourteen novels and numerous other works. His work is marked by extreme energy and virtuosity, whether he is being satirical, humorous, sentimental, or polemical. Dickens' popularity and literary greatness are not at odds with one another−he remains one of the few widely read "classics."

Check Your Progress 1

i) Which event in his life affected Dickens greatly?

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ii) List a few of Dickens' major novels

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

1.3 *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*: BACKGROUND

Dickens wrote during the Victorian age, when Queen Victoria was ruler of England. It was above all the age of great social change, marked by the dates of the two Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 ──the period of Dickens' literary production as well. The Reform Bills gave franchise to working-class men in response to movements like Chartism, which made demands for greater democratic participation in the government. A number of other legislations were enacted in such areas as factory reform, wages, education, public health, divorce and inheritance for women, trade and agriculture. The success in achieving reform measures in England was directly related to revolutionary movements in the rest of Europe, particularly France. Dickens was an active campaigner for reform, arguing, like many other Victorian thinkers, that this was the only way of staving off violent social upheavals like revolutions. This connection will be discussed in greater detail in the next units, in the specific context of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The Victorian age - especially after the 1850s - was also an age of progress: it was a period of rapid industrialization, imperial expansion and population increase, all of which led to overall material prosperity. The resulting feeling of nationalist pride could often sound complacent and jingoistic. Therefore, many of the writers of the time, like Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens and Morris directed their social criticism towards the materialism, the continuing economic and social disparities, the philistinism and the aggressive temper of the age, though at the same time these writers often shared the contemporary belief in progress.

Dickens was a recorder of the Victorian age, both celebrating and criticizing it. This double attitude is well exemplified in his description of the coming of the railways in *Dombey and Son:* he views it both as a sign of progress as well as a threat posed by change. Similarly in *A Tale of Two Cities*, he says, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. Though *A Tale of Two Cities* is a historical novel we must not forget that Dickens writes of an earlier time from the perspective of his own historical position.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Identify two important aspects of the Victorian period described above.

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ii) What is Dickens' relation to the period in which he wrote?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

1.4 *A TALE OF TWO CITIES* IN RELATION TO DICKENS' OTHER WORKS

A Tale of Two Cities has always been treated as something of an aberration among Dickens' novels. Edgar Johnson calls it Dickens' "least characteristic" book, and many standard critical works have little or nothing to say about the novel. In this Unit we shall argue that though *A Tale of Two Cities* shares some common preoccupations with Dickens' other novels, it goes, in a fundamental sense, against the grain of Dickens' development. You can see this in the self-congratulatory celebration of "Englishness" that underlies the novel. Let us look at the continuities first.

1.4.1 Dickens' Portrayal of Women

Dickens' chief women characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* follow the pattern set in many of his other novels. Dickens' heroines are not among his major character creations. He both used and constructed the Victorian stereotype of the woman as the "angel in the house." Such a woman is above all a good homemaker, a good wife, daughter, and mother, always patient, submissive, and acceptably "feminine". The figure of Agnes in *David Copperfield* is a-well-known example of such a heroine; Florence Dombey (*Dombey and Son*), Esther Summerson (*Bleak House*), Amy Dorrit (*Little Dorrit*), are very similar. Thus Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* may be viewed as a typical Dickens heroine. She is deprecatingly described in the novel itself (by Sidney Carton, who does not perhaps really mean it) as a "golden-haired doll".

In contrast and often in opposition to the "fair" heroine there is also, in many of Dickens' novels, the "dark" woman who is passionate, vengeful, and troublesome. She is outside the pale of the domestic, an outsider, a criminal, a woman with a past, or a foreigner. Mme. Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* is based on this type, but she also breaks, in significant ways, from Dickens' other "dark" women. What distinguishes Mme. Defarge is her commitment to the revolutionary cause. Mme. Defarge is, as we shall

see, a highly talented woman, whose outstanding intellectual abilities and organizational skills make her the natural leader among the masses of St. Antoine. Dickens, it would seem, is actually afraid of her commitment and her abilities. Dickens had consistently disapproved of work-oriented anti-domestic women, but the school -teacher Miss Blimber (*Dombey and Son*) or the professional philanthropist Mrs. Jelleby (*Bleak House*) are the only ones clearly satirized. In *A Tale of Two Cities* on the other hand, the threat that Mme Defarge poses not just to domesticity but also to the larger social organizations, is so strong that she has to be actually killed.

1.4.2 Theme of Burial and Resurrection

Dickens uses the ideas of death and resurrection, with the associated concept of death-in-life, in a central way in *A Tale of Two Cities*. These themes are then developed in some of the later novels that follow it. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the major centres of interest is the story of Dr. Manette, a man deeply traumatized by eighteen years in prison, a form of "burial" alive. He recovers his energies and interests after his release though not without occasional relapses into a condition of withdrawal. In *Great Expectations*, which followed soon after, Dickens shows in the figure of Miss Havisham a character outside this mode who, refuses to emerge from her self -imposed burial, and becomes a warped and unhealthy person as a result. In *Our Mutual Friend,* Dickens' last completed novel, the theme of resurrection is explored most fully. The hero, John Harmon, believed dead, is in fact rescued, and assumes another name and identity in his "resurrected" life. The theme interested Dickens because it allowed him to explore questions of human identity through such devices and psychological case studies as the "double", the schizophrenic, and the obsessive. The famous "twins" in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay, are anticipated and developed in other Dickens' novels, though not in terms of actual physical resemblance. Thus critics have noted that Pip, the hero of *Great Expectations*, and Orlick, the villain, are aspects of a single person, similarly we have Eugene Wraybum and Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*, united by their mutual, antagonism and their love for the same woman. The "double" serves the function of surrogacy and scapegoating, which have implications that we shall examine later in the specific context of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

1.4.3 Dickens and the Revolution

Although Dickens subjected virtually every institution of the English state to radical criticism, he was always deeply apprehensive about the prospect of a revolutionary upsurge in England. During the 1830s, when Dickens first began writing, the prospect of a revolution in England was very real. The economy was extremely unstable, and the living conditions of the working classes unbearable. The result was consecutive waves of working class agitations that culminated in the Chartist movement.

In his early novels, Dickens shared with many of his reform-minded contemporaries the conviction that the government had failed badly in providing the working classes with even the minimum decencies of life. But he also believed in the deeply entrenched middle-class image of any form of plebian uprising as anarchic and mindlessly violent. In *The Chimes* Dickens himself depicts with great vividness the process by which one of

the characters ─ Will Fern ─ is driven to total penury. But when Fern speaks of participating in an uprising against an oppressive state, Dickens' imagery increasingly highlights the anarchic, destructive dimensions of such events. When Dickens turned to the happenings in France in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was from the safety of the 1860s. Accordingly, as we shall see in the entire Unit we devote to Dickens' representation of the French revolution --- Dickens is able to project the revolution as a mad orgy of bloodletting without the anxiety that had underlain the world or Dickens' early novels where revolution had been a real possibility.

1.4.4 *A Tale of Two Cities* and Dickens' Later Novels

In spite of the continuities we have noted above, *A Tale of Two Cities* differs in one fundamental sense from the other novels of Dickens' later period. In order to respond to these differences we need to look a little more closely at the society to which the later Dickens was reacting as a novelist. Dickens' later novels were written in what has often been described as the " Age of Improvement" or "The Age of Progress". This period began roughly around 1850 and witnessed sustained economic growth, social and political stability, and rising standards of living for the majority. One of the great achievements of Dickens' later works is that they refuse to rest contented with "progress", and continue to expose to radical scrutiny the vital institutions of the Age of Improvement — its laws, its bureaucracy, its stock market, and its great metropolitan city.

Seen against this background *A Tale of Two Cities* is deficient in two important respects. Firstly, removed as it is in time from mid - Victorian England, the world of *A Tale of Two Cities* lacks the social density of *Dombey and Son* or *Little Doritt* and is as such incapable of providing Dickens with the context where his social imagination might find full expression. Thus *A Tale of Two Cities* has nothing that can compare with Dickens' treatment of the railway in *Dombey and Son*, or the idea of gentlemanliness in *Great Expectations*. Even more seriously, unlike *Dombey and Son, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Great Expectation* or *Our Mutual Friend*, which are deeply, fundamentally critical of the society of which they are a product, *A Tale of Two Cities* is imbued with a very uncharacteristic sense of smugness. Thus if the idea of "Englishness" is an object of contempt in *Our Mutual Friend*, in *A Tale of Two Cities* it is portrayed as an orderly and moderate mindset whose virtues are highlighted by the anarchic excesses of France.

Check Your Progress 3

i) What are the two contrasted types of women characters found in Dickens' novels, and how can you relate the central female figures in *A Tale of Two Cities* to them?

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ii) Relate the theme of burial and resurrection in *A Tale of Two Cities* to its use in some of Dickens' other novels.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit)

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have looked at the life of Dickens against the backdrop of the Victorian Age. Dickens was a prolific writer who wrote fourteen novels most of which are now considered 'classics'. Although he celebrated the great progress made by Victorian England, Dickens was a critic of the economic and social disparities that he saw around him. *A Tale Of Two Cities* shares some similarities with the other novels of Dickens: in his portrayal of women, in his use of the themes of burial and resurrection and in his faith in reform rather than revolution. Yet despite these similarities, *A Tale of Two Cities* is different because it projects an uncharacteristic sense of smug faith in' Englishness' as opposed to what are seen as the excesses of the French. We shall discuss this further in the subsequent Units.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Aberration : a sudden change away from the habitual way of thinking or acting

Bloodletting : bloodshed

Deprecating : to feel and express disapproval of, plead against

Bloodletting : bloodshed

Jingoism : blind admiration of one's country; proud belief that one's country is politically, and morally better than all others

Orgy : excessive indulgence in any activity

Penury : state of being very poor

Philistinism : condition of disliking art, music or beautifu1 things

Plebian : member of the common people of the lower social classes

Polemical : in the habit of arguing, attacking or defending opinions, ideas, etc.

Scapegoat : person or thing taking the blame for the fault of others

Schizophrenic : dementia marked by introversion and loss of connection between thoughts, feelings, and actions

Surrogate : acting or used in place of another substitute

Trauma : damage to the mind caused by some shock or command or some terrible experience

Virtuosity : a very high degree of skill in performance in one of the arts

1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) Dickens' father being sent to prison had a very great affect on Dickens.

ii) Some of his works include novels like *Oliver Twist, The Old Curiosity Shop, Nicholas Nickleby, Dombey and Sons, David Copperfield, Hard Times, Great Expectations* and many others.

Check Your Progress 2

i) The Reform Bills which gave franchise to working-class men and therefore, democratic participation in government and many legislative reforms involving wages, education, public health, inheritance for women etc. Secondly, it was an age of progress as far as industrialization and imperial expansion was concerned.

ii) Dickens was a recorder of the Victorian age. He celebrated it as well as criticized it.

Check Your Progress 3

i) One is the "angel in the house" type of woman, while the other is the "dark" woman who is vengeful and troublesome. Lucie Manette represents the former and Mme. Defarge represents the latter in *A Tale of Two Cities.*

ii) The theme of burial and resurrection can be seen in *Great Expectations* in the character of Miss Havisham, who returns to emerge from her self-imposed burial. In *Our Mutual Friend,* John Harmon who is believed to be dead is rescued, and assumes another name and identity in his "resurrected" life.

UNIT 2 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Structure

2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we have given you a detailed summary of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with critical comments as well as necessary quotations from the text, so that you can recognize the passages as and when we refer to them.

By the end of this unit you will:

- understand the story of the novel
- follow the discussion that we have provided in the next two units better.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Please read this unit carefully because it is here that you will find the raw material for all the subsequent discussions. Please keep the novel with you for ready reference as this summary should not be a substitute for reading the actual novel.

2.2 SUMMARY OF BOOK I

Let us now delve into the detailed summary of Book I.

2.2.1 Chapters 1-4

Summary: The novel begins on a dark and dangerous night with a man called Jarvis Lorry embarking on a strange mission. His mission is to help with the rehabilitation of Dr. Manette, a French physician who had been unjustly imprisoned in the most terrible prison in France - the Bastille - for eighteen years and is now, finally, released. Lorry arranges a meeting between Manette and his daughter Lucie who has never seen her father. Dr. Manette finds it impossible to believe that he has been "recalled to life". Defarge an old servant offers him accommodation in a loft that resembles his old prison cell. Mr. Lorry has broken the news of her father's release to Lucie and has now accompanied her from England to France to meet him.

Comment: The first important thing to note about these early chapters is the novel's famous opening paragraph:

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....

We guess from this, that the novel is going to be about "the ... times", that is, it is going to talk about a historical era as much as about individuals and families which are the normal preoccupations of novels. The age that the novel dramatizes is that of the French revolution (i.e., the last quarter of the eighteenth century). Dickens' opening paragraph suggests that the revolutionary period was a complex one, and that there were many ways of looking at it as the best of times as well as the worst of times, as wise as well as foolish, as idealistic belief as well as false consciousness. In a later unit which will discuss the topic at length, we will try to gauge whether Dickens does in fact treat the French revolution with the complexity that is promised in the opening paragraph ─ and which it deserves as a crucial political event in the history of Europe. The opening paragraphs can also be examined as an example of Dickens' stylistic virtuosity, as in this analysis by the critic Martin Fido:

In this magnificent opening Dickens seeks to hold the reader's attention by reducing chaos to disguised order. His opening sentence ─ really a series of unpunctuated sentences ─ gives the appearance of chaos by its speedy contradictions; actually it is almost blatantly ordered in that the pairs of opposites make every second clause completely predictable.

Parallel pairs are extended in the second paragraph to present the comparison between the two countries. In the third paragraph Dickens sets up a slightly supercilious ironical tone of moral condemnation, which is to be used throughout the book with reference to England. The fourth paragraph provides the grim irony, which is to be used for France, and predicts the subject of the book. The fifth paragraph shows that England is certainly not going to be held up as a perfect moral exemplar to France; indicates the theme of lawlessness which is to be peculiarly English in the book, and returns to the suggestion of anarchy which the opening sentence appeared to indicate. And the last paragraph leads back to the notion of specific

people directing their individual lives through this historical climate, and so prepares us for the opening of the action.

The opening chapters are important for another reason as well. They tell us of the terrible circumstances surrounding one of the important characters of the novel Dr. Manette. The experience of being imprisoned for eighteen years in the prison, the Bastille, has a terrible impact upon his character and affects him in strange ways even after his release, as we shall see.

2.2.2 Chapters 5 - 6

Summary: The action moves to a suburb of Paris - St. Antoine - where Dr. Manette has been sheltered in a dark loft by his former servant Defarge. The loft is located over a wine-shop presided over by Defarge's wife. At this place a group of three men, all addressed as "Jacques", mysteriously gather to peep at the poor prisoner. An emotional meeting between father and daughter takes place. Manette is bewildered and withdrawn, and clings to his cobbler's tools and bench since he has been accustomed to the occupation of shoe making in prison. Lucie shows great compassion and resilience in dealing with the situation. It is decided that Mr. Lorry, Dr. Manette, and Lucie should leave Paris without delay, and soon they embark on their journey to London.

Comment: We see Dr. Manette constantly engaged in making shoes as it prevents him, as he later explains, from going mad under the pressure of his loneliness. Even after he has gained a great deal of normality under Lucie's loving care, he reverts to his shoe making whenever he finds himself unable to cope with mental tension. Dr. Manette's personality is split as he fluctuates between being the caring parent and doctor at most times, and the prisoner who obsessively makes shoes to stave off the horrors of his past life at certain other times. We would call his condition schizophrenia today. We shall see later how not only Dr. Manette, but many other characters may be viewed as divided personalities.

You should now go on to read Chapter 5 very carefully. Set in St. Antoine, a suburb of Paris which became the epicenter of the revolution, Chapter 5 introduces themes, ideas, and images that are absolutely crucial to Dickens' representation of the French revolution. The first striking thing about St. Antoine is its poverty, manifest in the eagerness with which the local inhabitants rush to scoop up the red wine that has spilled on the streets from a broken cask. When a "tall joker" dips his finger in the muddy wine and scrawls the word "Blood" on the wall, a connection is suggested between a poverty-stricken people and a bloody revolution. But the blood-wine connection also connects the impending revolution to the horrible idea of blood drinking. Further, the incident subverts the traditional religious symbolism of wine as Christ's blood in the Roman Catholic sacrament. So from the very beginning, Dickens' attitude to the French revolution is marked by duplicity. While on the one hand he shows that the French poor have good reason to revolt, on the other he suggests that the actual revolution will be an orgy of blood-letting.

In this section we are briefly introduced to one of the novel's chief characters. Mme. Defarge, who stays in the shadows, knitting. Both Mme. Defarge and her knitting will gain in significance as the novel progresses.

Check Your Progress 1

i) How does Dickens describe the era in which he sets the novel?

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ii) What is the significance of the blood-wine imagery?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

2.3 SUMMARY OF BOOK II

And now let us go on to the chapter wise summary and anaysis of Book II.

2.3.1 Chapter 1: Five Years Later

Summary: Tellson's Bank, where Mr. Lorry is employed, is described as an "old fashioned place", in this respect like England itself. Jerry Cruncher is employed by Tellson as an odd-job man and porter. Cruncher's home-life is described . His wife is a meek, hard-working woman whom Jerry scolds constantly for "praying agin me". His son admires and imitates Jerry.

Comment: Dickens is gently satirical of Tellson's Bank. The main point for you to note is his criticism of England, whose resistance to change is a sign of complacency. He also remarks on the barbarity of the laws in eighteenth century England, which invoked the death sentence for even minor crimes. The scenes of the Cruncher household are among the few comic interludes in this novel. Jerry is a typical household tyrant and bully, who uses his wife as a scapegoat.

2.3.2 Chapter 2: A Sight

Summary: Charles Darnay, a French immigrant, is tried for treason at the Old Bailey. Dickens describes Darnay as follows: ..." a young man of about five and twenty, well grown and well-looking, with a sunburnt cheek and a dark eye". There is a large crowd at the trial, chiefly because of the widespread public interest at the time in witnessing the death of a criminal. Among the witnesses are Dr. Manette and his daughter.

Comment: Chapter 2 introduces us in a dramatic way to Charles Darnay who may be considered the "hero" of the novel. (You may wish to begin thinking at this point about the nature of a hero, and about the kind of hero we may expect to find in a historical novel). Darnay attracts Lucie Manette's

interest and sympathy, as he does ours. Dickens also satirises in this chapter, the barbarity of the English laws of the time, as well as the "ogreish" interest of the "mob" in such spectacles as hanging and quartering. He wishes us to note that in this respect the English people are no different from the bloodthirsty French populace that later will gather in such large numbers to watch the deaths of the aristocrats at the Guillotine. (Note the different connotations of the words "crowd", "mob", and "rabble", all of which describe a gathering of people).

2.3.3 Chapter 3: A Disappointment

Summary: At the end of a long and suspenseful trial, Darnay is acquitted, thanks mainly to the efforts of Sydney Carton, an assistant to the defence attorney. Carton's most effective strategy is his demonstration of his own close resemblance to the prisoner -- he thereby confuses one of the opposition's witnesses. Jerry, a spectator at the court, thinks that the phrase "recalled to life" (earlier applied by Mr. Lorry to Dr. Manettee's rescue), would aptly apply to Darnay now.

Comment: This chapter marks the first appearance of Sydney Carton, who may also be regarded as the hero or one of the heroes - of the novel. His appearance is described as "careless and slovenly if not debauched" - in contrast to Darnay's gentlemanly appearance. Yet the resemblance between the two, noted and pointed out by Carton himself, is of great significance in the acquittal of Darnay, and anticipates the ending of the book. The theme of the "double" engages Dickens in many of his books. At this point in *A Tale of Two Cities* it is used merely as a striking and useful coincidence.'

2.3.4 Chapter 4: Congratulatory

Summary: Dr. Manette, five years after his release, has recovered, but occasionally the "shadow of the Bastille" is still visible upon him. Lucie's role in saving him is described by the metaphor of the "golden thread". Lucie connects the earliest part of Dr. Manette's life with the present, both happy times: hence she herself is the "golden thread". Carton and Darnay dine together, and we are called upon to note their mutual antipathy. The chapter ends with Carton's reflections upon his sense of a wasted life.

Comment: One of the major centers of interest in the novel is Dickens' psychological analysis of Dr. Manette, a man released after eighteen years of unjust solitary confinement. Dickens wishes to make Sydney Carton also a complex character, but he never quite explains the reasons for Carton's failure. Carton, therefore, strikes us as a person full of self-pity, rather than as a truly tragic figure.

2.3.5 Chapter 5: The Jackal

Summary: The "jackal" refers to Sydney Carton, since he "rendered suit and service" to Stryver the "lion". In conversation with Stryver, he disparages Lucie as a "golden - haired Doll" (In your opinion how apt is this description?). When Carton returns home in the early hours of the morning, he perceives the darkness as symbolic of "the waste forces within him" (refer to Chapter 5).

Comment: Dickens develops the portrait of an anti-hero (a character whose qualities are the reverse of a hero's even though he possesses all the abilities

of a hero - such as courage, intelligence, good looks, talents). The mood and symbolism of the last paragraphs of the chapter will be recalled at the novel's end when Carton decides upon his 'sacrifice' (see Book III, Chapter 9).

2.3.6 Chapter 6: Hundreds of People

Summary: We are introduced in this chapter to Dr. Manette's quiet and pleasant house in Soho, a district in London. Miss Pross, Lucie's devoted companion, and, Mr. Lorry, now a family friend, discuss Dr. Manette's condition, and remark with concern on his need to retain his cobbler's bench and tools in his room, Lucie expresses a fanciful thought to her visitors: that the echoes of street sounds are the "footsteps of the people who are to come into my life, and my father's". Dr. Manette is upset when he hears a story about a prisoner in the Tower. Soon after, a storm breaks out. Dickens prophesies another symbolic storm when "a great crowd of people with its rush and roar" shall bear down upon them.

Comment: Miss Pross and Mr. Lorry take on their roles of devoted friends of the Manettes. We also see the progress of the two young men's interest in Lucie. Dickens describes the house as a "harbour from the raging streets". In all his books Dickens praises the home as a refuge, and the woman as the maker of the home. Thus, Lucie's skill in home-making is an important aspect of the tranquil domesticity that Dickens contrasts with the world outside. And, yet the "home" cannot entirely keep the "world" out. The place attracts echoes and these seem symbolic to Lucie of coming events; so too, to Dickens, is the storm that breaks out. In what ways can you interpret these symbols?

2.3.7 Chapters 7—9

Summary: The action moves back to Paris, this time to the world of the aristocracy. Dickens' attitude to this class is satirical. He introduces us to one of its members by his title - Monseigneur, or Lord - rather than by his name, as if it was only the former that truly identified him. This Monseigneur is a decadent, parasitical creature: It requires four men, all "ablaze with gorgeous decorations" to feed him his evening beverage, Dickens tells us. Another aristocrat, the Marquis d' Evremonde, is seen in attendance at his court. The Marquis is a cold-bloodedly cruel man, as we discover when his coach runs over a poor child in the streets of the crowded St. Antoine district. In response to the father's grief, the Marquis contemptuously tosses a coin into the crowd, as the residents of St. Antoine watch in silent anger. At home, the Marquis receives a guest late at night who turns out to be none other than Charles Darnay. From their conversation we learn that Darnay is the Marquis's nephew and heir. But Darnay has renounced his name, his title, and his class. He condemns the greed and cruelty of the aristocracy, and gives up all claims to his inheritance. The Marquis reacts contemptuously, but his contempt does not last long. That very night he is murdered; he is discovered in the morning with a knife driven through his heart with a message that says: "Drive him fast to his tomb"!

Comment: In this unit we perceive a pattern of violence and counter-violence, which will emerge as an important underlying theme in Dickens' interpretation of the French revolution. Unlike Burke, many of whose images Dickens uses in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens sees the French

aristocracy not as noble victims but as coldblooded oppressors. But the Marquis's violent death is also a foretaste of the violence that will later be unleashed by the Revolution. This becomes Dickens' primary mode of representing this historical event, rather than any more deliberative analysis. Both images and rhetoric are employed emotively in depicting the violence of events. Thus the blood red reflection of the rising sun as it is reflected in the "chateau fountain" is another symbol of the blood that will be spilt during the Revolution, like the wine in the previous chapters. The other important symbol that Dickens develops is the motif of knitting. Mme. Defarge knits continuously as she watches -- the killing of the little child, the Marquis's arrogant compensation for the death that he has caused, the silent helplessness of the crowd. She knitted, says Dickens, with the "steadfastness of fate". Through her knitting Mme. Defarge keeps an account of all the crimes perpetrated by the aristocracy. The inevitable retribution, when it does come, will be extremely violent. Knitting has a traditional association in Greek myth with the steady pattern and progress of Fate, and thus Mme. Defarge becomes a larger-than-life figure, representing fate itself. At the same time knitting is a "feminine" and commonplace domestic activity, one that it would be natural for a woman in Mme. Defarge's position to do. We notice how she consciously subverts this association by using it instead, for her own sinister purposes. Her knitted register is doubly coded because it appears to be an innocuous routine activity, and it uses symbols that only Mme. Defarge can interpret. Thus it serves as the perfect cover for Mme. Defarge ' s secret revolutionary activities.

2.3.8 Chapters 10 -14

Chapter 10: Two Promises

Summary: Charles Darnay's modest profession as a teacher of French in London and Cambridge is described. He is in love with Lucie Manette, and meets Dr. Manette to seek his permission to court her. He analyses the unique relationship between this father and daughter, as "I know that when she is clinging to you, the hands of baby, girl, and woman, all in one, are round your neck". Two promises are demanded and made in this chapter. Darnay requests Dr. Manette to say nothing against him if Lucie should ever confide her love for him. When he offers to reveal his real identity, Dr. Manette in turn makes him promise that he will only tell him when, or if, their marriage should take place.

Comment: The dramatic irony of Darnay's falling in love with Lucie becomes clear only later in the book when the Evremondes' role in Dr. Manette's arrest is disclosed. Nevertheless, Dr. Manette's apprehensions are clearly due to more than his unusually close relationship with his daughter – hence the promise he demands of Darnay. Darnay's understanding of this relationship is idealised but is accurate in many respects.

Chapter 11: A Companion Picture

Summary: Stryver confides to Carton his decision to propose marriage to Lucie. **Comment:** This is a comic scene, which shows Stryver's conceit and pomposity.

Chapter 12: The Fellow of Delicacy

Summary: When Mr. Lorry advises Stryver against proposing, Stryver saves face by pretending to have lost interest in Lucie himself.

Comment: This comic chapter brings Stryver's "courtship" to an end. Stryver's tactic is a classic example of saying "sour grapes" in order to reconcile oneself to the unattainable.

Chapter 13: The Fellow of No Delicacy

Summary: Sydney Carton proposes to Lucie and is gently and regretfully rejected by her.

Comment: Dickens intends a contrast between Lucie's two suitors, "the fellow of delicacy" (Stryver), and "the fellow of no delicacy" (Carton). He uses these designations ironically. The chapter is an example of Dickens' well-known sentimentality. Carton's promise to help Lucie at this point becomes prophetic. The Victorian ideal of the woman as one who redeems mankind is set forth here.

Chapter 14: The Honest Tradesman

Summary: The chapter begins with a "crowd" scene, of the kind that *A Tale of Two Cities* is famous for. A crowd attacks a funeral procession since the dead man is rumoured to be a spy. Jerry Cruncher and his son join the crowd and attend the burial. Cruncher sets out secretly in the dead of night, followed by his curious son and attended by two other friends, to steal the corpse of the "spy", Roger Cly. They find the grave empty. Young Jerry runs away in fright, with the "strong idea that the coffin he had seen was running after him". Cruncher takes out his disappointment on his wife. Jerry explains to his son that a "Resurrection Man" is a "tradesman" whose "goods are a branch of scientific goods".

Comment: The theme of "resurrection" or being "recalled to life" is an important one in this novel. By making Jerry Cruncher a secret grave-robber (who sells his corpses to medical students), Dickens treats the theme in a gruesomely comic fashion. The chapter also reveals Dickens' attitude to the "mob", or "rabble", as he calls it: an attitude of simultaneous revulsion and fascination. The irrationality and violence of the mob makes him describe it as "a monster much dreaded"

2.3.9 Chapters 15—16

Summary: These chapters are set in Defarge's gloomy wine shop. Chapter 15 begins with a road mender's eyewitness account of the execution of a man called Gaspard as narrated to Defarge and his friends. Gaspard, in fact, is the man whose son had been run over by the Marquis's carriage and who had then revenged himself by stabbing the Marquis. As punishment by the law, he is arrested, paraded through the streets, tortured and publicly hanged. While Defarge and his friends listen to the road mender's account with rising indignation, Mme. Defarge, standing in the shadows, calmly continues her knitting. It would be impossible, Dickens says, to erase one letter from "the knitted register" that Mme. Defarge keeps, on the crimes of the aristocracy. After Defarge's guests depart, a state spy named Barsad enters the wine shop. The Defarges show great skill in countering Barsad's

attempts to extract information from them. Before his departure, Barsad reveals that the daughter of Defarge's old master, Dr. Manette, has married the aristocrat Evremonde who now calls himself Darnay in England. Defarge and his wife have faith in a people's revolution in France, but they have different attitudes to the class enemy, the aristocrats. Defarge shows a semblance of feeling for his former master when he expresses the hope that his son-in-law will never venture into post-revolutionary France; but Mme. Defarge more dispassionately holds that Darnay's fate should have nothing to do with their personal feelings for Dr. Manette.

Comment: The pattern of violence and counter-violence that, we have seen, underlying Dickens' interpretation of the events in France is reinforced in Chapters 15 and 16. We can now unravel the pattern: the Marquis kills a child accidentally and then, treats the child's parents with utter contempt; Gaspard (the child's father) avenges himself on the Marquis; Gaspard is arrested, tortured and publicly executed by the laws of a State that is ruled by the members of the Marquis's class, the aristocracy; these atrocities are recorded in Mme. Defarge's register and will no doubt trigger off counter atrocities when the revolutionaries seize power.

The chapters we are discussing are important also because they give us an inside view of the thinking of the revolutionaries and of Mme. Defarge. Dickens' attitude to the revolutionaries is, it seems to us, split. On the one hand he sees them as "dark, revengeful, repressed", capable of unleashing unlimited violence if ever they should gain access to power. Of Mme. Defarge, Dickens even says that "the world would do well" never to breed the likes of her again. But, on the other hand, under this condemnation lies a very real if somewhat frightened admiration as well. The revolutionaries are a determined lot and have a strong secret organisation. The Defarges show their experience and their ability to survive as underground political activists through the skill with which they handle the spy Barsad. The natural leader of the St. Antoine revolutionaries is, of course, Mme. Defarge. It is her unswerving confidence in the inevitability of the revolution that keeps alive the hopes of Defarge and his friends, and it is her razor sharp powers of observation and her unfailing memory which documents these acts of oppression. What is more, Mme. Defarge is an extraordinary organiser who is in constant touch with the people of St. Antoine, and channelises the anger of their miserable lives into the cause of the revolution:

In the evening, at which season of all others, St. Antoine turned itself inside out, and sat on doorsteps and window-ledges - Mme. Defarge with her work in hand was accustomed to pass from place to place, group to group ... They knitted worthless things but the mechanical work was a mechanical substitute for eating and drinking ..... if the bony fingers had been still, the stomachs would have been more pinched.

Knitting now gains another meaning. It has grown into a symbol of the solidarity that is developing increasingly among the hungry and the poor - and the person who contributes most to bringing about this solidarity is Mme. Defarge. Consider also the therapeutic function of knitting as a mechanical activity, and consider whether it resembles Dr. Manette's shoe-making in this respect.

2.3.10 Chapters 17 -20

Chapter 17: One Night

Summary: On the night before Lucie's wedding, Dr. Manette accepts her reassurances of continuing love and duty whole-heartedly, recalling his prison days by way of contrast to his present happiness. Dickens offers a comment on the kind of strength of character displayed by Dr. Manette in, overcoming the trauma of the past.

Comment: This chapter provides further insight into Dr. Manette's character, and into the unique nature of the relationship between father and daughter.

Chapter 18: Nine Days

Summary: As soon as Lucie leaves on her honeymoon with her husband, Dr. Manette breaks down as a result of Charles Darnay's disclosures to him. This takes the form of a relapse into his old pastime of making shoes. Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross are dismayed and helpless.

Comment: Dickens' psychological insight into the nature of trauma is an acute one. His account of Dr. Manette's breakdown is chillingly accurate.

Chapter 19: An Opinion

Summary: After nine days in this condition, Dr. Manette spontaneously recovers, to his friends' amazement. At Mr. Lorry's urging, he analyses his condition, expresses his confidence that such a relapse will not occur again and, as a safeguard against its recurrence, agrees - though reluctantly - to give up his workbench and tools. Accordingly, Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross destroy them, feeling irrationally guilty as they do so.

Comment: The analysis of Dr. Manette is continued in this chapter. Dr. Manette's self-knowledge comes from his fear of the "delicate organisation of the mind", but is also informed by the, "confidence of a man who had slowly won his assurance out of personal endurance and distress". His explanation of his attachment to the occupation of shoe-making as a form of therapy is worth noting.

Chapter 20: A Plea

Summary: Carton gets permission from Darnay to continue to visit the family. Lucie expresses to her husband her faith in Carton.

Comment: By providing this explanation of the relationship between Lucie and Sydney Carton, Dickens makes Carton's sacrifice at the end more credible to the reader.

2.3.11 Chapters 21 - 24

Summary: In this section that comprises the last four chapters of Book II, the action moves rapidly back and forth between England and France. It begins in England with an evocation of the peace, and bliss that envelopes Lucie's home. Lucie's home represents in miniature the peace and stability that England itself enjoys. In contrast, across the Channel a great revolution has broken out in France and its reverberations echo even in Lucie's protected home. Then the action shifts to France and we are given a direct first-hand account of the revolution. A great armed crowd (of which the Defarges are a part) has gathered on the streets of Paris and proceeds to storm the Bastille.

Defarge finds the cell where Dr. Manette had been imprisoned, and finds a hidden document there. The crowd then moves through the length and breadth of Paris killing and arresting anyone who is even remotely suspected of being an enemy of the revolution. One such victim is the notorious speculator Foulon, whom the crowd gleefully hangs with a handful of grass stuffed in his mouth. Another victim is Gabelle, an employee of Darnay's who finds himself on the wrong side of the revolutionary council precisely because of this. Darnay decides to come to Paris in response to Gabelle's plea for help.

Comment: Chapters 21, 22, 23 give us the first extended and direct descriptions of the French revolution in this narrative. As we might expect, Dickens' attitude to the revolution is almost entirely negative. He shows it as bloodthirsty, anarchic, and ultimately self-destructive since it brings, not a period of abundance, but only famine and drought. The revolutionaries are depicted again as a hungry mob who find compensation for their material impoverishment in the cruelty that they inflict upon their perceived enemies, and who are so fanatical that they laugh when heads are chopped off. What are the means by which Dickens manages to give a negative colouring to his depiction of the revolution while seemingly providing an objective account? Partly by direct statement − i.e. by describing or stating outright the cruelty or arbitrariness of the revolutionaries. More important is his use of a specific kind of language and imagery for these accounts. We shall later discuss at greater length the rhetorical strategies by which Dickens manages to make us see the French revolution as a terrible event.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Comment on the significance of the resemblance between Carton and Darnay.

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ii) What is the significance of Mme Defarge's knitting? List at least three meanings that the image of knitting acquires in the novel.

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iii) What are the qualities that Dickens connects with the revolution and the revolutionaries?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

2.4 SUMMARY OF BOOK III

And now let us read a summary and analysis of Book III

2.4.1 Chapters 1-6

Summary: Darnay enters Paris and is soon arrested. As an ex- aristocrat and an emigre Darnay has no rights at all. Lucie and her family arrive in Paris, frantically in search of Darnay. Now a small English community is set up in the very midst of revolutionary Paris which replicates the ordered life of the Soho home. As an ex- prisoner of the Bastille, and therefore, by implication a victim of the oppression of the aristocracy, Dr. Manette enjoys the goodwill of the revolution. He uses this to his advantage. Using great resilience and perseverance, he manages to gain access to the inner circle of the revolutionary committees. He is able to at least ensure that Darnay will not be arbitrarily executed. He then sends the good news to Lucie.

Comment: In this section the action moves entirely to France. The country is seen to be entirely in the grip of what Dickens represents as revolutionary anarchy. The almost mythical aura of horror with which Dickens surrounds the revolution is achieved through various means - such as the inexorable process by which Darnay finds himself arrested by the very people whose cause he has always supported; by the incessant crash of the guillotine blade as it chops off heads; by the mad and orgiastic frenzy of the dance of the Carmagnole; and by the hellish scenes of the turning of the grindstone (see Chapter 2). As against this mad behaviour of the French, the English group are shown to be full of fortitude and calm. The contrast is one between two nations, or races, as well as an opposition between the "home" and the "nation", in which the former possesses moral value, while the latter possesses power. Thus we see the fragile Lucie running her household in as orderly and caring a manner as in England, in spite of being under great emotional stress; Mr. Lorry, similarly, places Tellson's interests above all else, even refusing to stay with his dear friends the Manettes in order not to jeopardise its safety; Miss Pross and even the surly Jerry, become models of the English spirit. The contrast between the resilient, orderly, moderate English, and the volatile, violent, anarchic French is, in fact, one of the underlying themes of the novel and, in this sense, we may detect a smug, self-congratulatory nuance in the very title of the novel with its invitation to compare two cities, two cultures, two ways of life

2.4.2 Chapters 7-10

Summary: Dr. Manette successfully stakes his very high reputation among the revolutionaries to procure Darnay's release. But almost immediately after Darnay's reunion with his family, he is re-arrested in the name of the Republic by a delegation of citizens. No reasons are given for his re-arrest, but the delegation assures Dr. Manette and his daughter that a full case against him would be made the following day. Meanwhile Miss Pross who is out for a walk with Jerry Cruncher suddenly encounters her long-lost

brother Solomon who now calls himself Barsad. Solomon had fled England under dubious circumstances, and had begun a shady career in France as a spy of the ancient regime. After the Revolution he had managed to switch loyalties and become a functionary in one of the revolutionary councils. The selfish Barsad is embarrassed at meeting his English sister and tries to get away, but before he can do so Sydney Carton finds them. The latter has come to Paris apparently on official business, but in fact to find out if he can help his beloved Lucie and her husband in some way. Carton immediately senses that Barsad can be useful to him. He persuades Barsad to come with him to Mr. Lorry's residence by threatening to reveal Barsad's past as a small-time crook in England and later as a spy for the ancient regime unless he helps Carton gain access to Darnay's cell whenever he wishes. Carton then visits a chemist and buys a mysterious powder. The next day Darnay is on trial again, and we might say that the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* reaches its climax in this scene. The most damning evidence against Darnay comes from none other than his father-in-law, Dr. Manette in the form of an account that he maintained of the circumstances leading up to his imprisonment. Defarge had ferreted out the loose sheets where Dr. Manette had written his account during the storming of the Bastille and he now presents his "evidence" to the revolutionary council court. Dr. Manette, by his own account, had accidentally become witness to a most appalling crime perpetrated by two aristocratic brothers. The brothers had brought Dr. Manette in the dead of the night to examine two patients. One was a beautiful peasant woman who had been beaten brutally and raped by the brothers. 'The other was her brother who had been stabbed repeatedly, presumably because he had tried to protect her honour. Both patients were dying. Dr. Manette had done what he could, refused to accept payment from the brothers, and, in order to appease his conscience, had written to a Minister detailing all he had seen. Dr. Manette had been arrested late at night and cast, without the semblance of a trial, into the Bastille. What makes Dr. Manette's evidence absolutely damning for his son-in-law is that the villains of Dr. Manette's story turn out to be Darnay's father and uncle. What is more, the victimised woman had a sister who grew up vowing revenge on anyone who had any connection with the aristocracy. That woman's name, we learn soon enough, is Mme. Defarge.

Comment: This section sets into motion the plot that will finally culminate in Darnay's release and Carton's supreme sacrifice. But more important, from the point of view of the novel's overall preoccupation, is the revelation of the circumstances leading to Dr. Manette's imprisonment. These circumstances, which are at the source of so much of the action of the novel, make the ideas - which have been frequently stressed through both imagery and authorial commentary as we have seen - concrete and vivid to the readers. Thus Dr. Manette's story dramatises in the most vivid form the utter ruthlessness of an aristocracy that is not held accountable even for its worst crimes. On the other hand, this oppression leads to an anti-aristocratic feeling so implacable that it overrides all human and personal considerations. The pattern of violence and counter violence has, it would seem, become an almost autonomous process: it seems to work with the inexorability of fate in Greek tragedy to perpetuate the most terrible ironies. Thus Darnay's mother, aware of what her husband had done, had sought,

from her heart, to help the sister of the dead woman, but the very sister ─ Mme. Defarge ─ seeks Darnay's blood. Again Dr. Manette's indictment of the aristocracy becomes the means of damning his own son-in-law who had long ago rejected the class into which he had been born. In Dickens' representation, then, the French revolution seems to have created a topsy turvy world where men's best intentions turn in on themselves creating the most unforeseen and devastating of effects.

2.4.3 Chapters 11-15

Summary: The novel draws to a swift climax in these chapters. In Chapter 11 ("Dusk"), Lucie bids farewell to her husband after the trial. The next chapter is entitled "Darkness", for two reasons: one, Carton discovers from a visit to Defarge's wine-shop that Mme. Defarge intends to indict Lucie, her child, and Dr. Manette shortly, as part of her scheme of "extermination" of the entire Evremonde family; and two, Dr. Manette relapses into his old condition as a result of the shock of his failure. The reason for Mme. Defarge's implacable enmity is revealed--she is the sister of the girl who had been raped and killed by the Evremonde brothers. Sydney Carton and Mr. Lorry plan the swift escape of Lucie and her family in view of the danger they are in. Chapter 13 ("Fifty-two"), shifts to the prison where Darnay awaits his death with fifty-one others. He makes his final preparations. Dickens writes of his irrational obsession with the guillotine, a fascination with which he appears to identify. Carton enters Darnay's cell, overpowers him, exchanges clothes with him, and has him carried out. In the concluding part of the chapter we see Darnay successfully escaping with the others to England. Carton's plan has succeeded. Chapter 14 describes the death of Mme. Defarge, accidentally shot by Miss Pross while they are struggling with each other in the rooms of Dr. Manette where Mrne. Defarge had gone to seek out Lucie. Miss Pross's loyalty saves Lucie but results in Miss Pross losing her hearing as a result of the gun's going off too close to her. In the famous concluding chapter, Dickens describes the noble and martyred death of Sydney Carton. Carton offers his support and protection to a young seamstress also condemned to die. He recalls again the words of Christ:

I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he who- believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

Dickens allows Carton a prophetic vision by means of which he is able to tell us of the future fate of all the principal characters: the good prosper, and the wicked perish (Defarge is among those who will die by the guillotine). Carton dies with the thought:

It is 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.

Comment: The debate between Defarge and his wife (Chapter 12) is significant for showing us the greater determination and ferocity of her character. Dickens explains her motivation with a mixture of understanding and bafflement. The struggle between Mme. Defarge and Miss Pross that Dickens describes in this chapter (14) may be perceived as a struggle between Good and Evil in which Good triumphs, in however unlikely a way. Mme. Defarge must also be shown to die by violence - hence this somewhat comic

fight. Dickens also shows himself to be a skilful story-teller, since he is able to create and maintain suspense about the escape throughout the chapter. The dominant figure in these last chapters is, however, Sydney Carton who shows great resourcefulness, mastery, and courage in planning the escape. Dickens introduces a minor new character at this stage, the nameless little seamstress, a kind of replacement for Lucie and her daughter, who serves to show up the indiscriminate ruthlessness of the revolutionaries and thereby indicts them. Dickens' analysis of the Revolution in Chapter 15 views it as a form of just retribution for the excesses committed by the aristocrats in earlier times. Only magic, he suggests, can restore their previous glory. This analysis contradicts the implications of his previous metaphor for the Revolution as a disease that indiscriminately devours the guilty as well as the innocent. Finally, we must note how the theme of resurrection is extended by Dickens to apply to the Revolution as well. After the death of these new oppressors, Carton prophesies, there will arise a new order which he describes as a "rising from this abyss", so that, in the course of time, there will be:

a beautiful city and a brilliant people and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation, for itself and wearing out.

In Dickens' earlier diagnosis of the Revolution, we have not seen any sign of the possibility of such a hopeful outcome. The ending thus strikes us as a false resolution. Carton's death too loses some of its tragic force since Dickens sees his death as duly compensated by the happy future of Lucie and her family. His invocation of "rest" suggests Carton's weariness and his longing for death; so we do not question the tragic abbreviation of a young life. (You may like to consider why the last lines of the novel, spoken by Sydney Carton, have become so famous).

Check Your Progress 3

i) How does Dr. Mannette become the unwitting means of condemning his son-in-law?

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ii) Why is Chapter 12 entitled "darkness"?

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iii) Express your opinion about the ending of the novel.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this fairly long Unit, we have discussed what happens in Books I, II and III of the novel as well as looked critically at some of the specific features of Dickens' art. Set in London and Paris in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, we read about how personal relationships are affected by larger political and social upheavals. We have seen how Lucie meets her father, whom she has never seen before, after his release from the dreaded Bastille where he had been in solitary confinement for eighteen years. On their return to England, while Dr Manette recovers slowly from his trauma Lucie is courted by three men of whom she accepts Charles Darnay. Meanwhile the revolution is beginning to simmer in France and the atrocities by the French aristocracy impinge on the tranquility of the Manette household, as Charles Darnay happens to be the nephew of the notorious Marquis d'Evremonde. After the Bastille is stormed and the castle of the Marquis is burned down his manager Gabelle is arrested by the revolutionary Tribunal. In response to Gabelle's pleas for help, Darnay decides to return to France. In the last part of the novel, the events are set entirely in revolutionary France. Darnay is arrested soon after his arrival in France. Dr. Manette and Lucie arrive in Paris in search of him. The events of the Revolution during the "Terror" are described: the executions, the "grindstone", the mad dances, the trials, and the general chaos. After much effort and persistence, Dr. Manette secures Darnay's acquittal. But he is arrested immediately, on the basis of an account written by (his father-in-law) Dr. Manette, who had hidden it in the Bastille cell when he was imprisoned. Defarge later discovers the written account that had been hidden earlier in Dr Manette's cell in the Bastille. In it Dr. Manette has exposed the Evermonde brothers as rapists and murderers. Mme. Defarge plots the arrest of the others also, but is thwarted by Miss Pross who accidentally kills her. Carton enters the prison, drugs and overpowers Darnay, changes clothes with him, and helps him to escape. He goes to the guillotine in the guise of Darnay, making this great sacrifice willingly for Lucie's sake. He prophesies a "resurrection" of himself in Lucie's future son, and of the city of Paris itself after the revolution has run its course.

2.6 GLOSSARY

evocation : calling up a feeling or its expression

exemplar : suitable to be copied as an example

innocuous : harmless

reverberations : repeated echoes

supercilious : haughty, scornful

to stave off : to fend off; to keep away

ancient regime : the older order comprising the king, the nobles and the clergy

émigré : person who leaves his/her own country usually for political reasons

expiation : the payment for a crime or wicked action by accepting punishment readily and by doing something to show that one is sorry

inexorable : whose actions or effects cannot be changed or prevented by one's efforts

jeopardize : to endanger

to ferret out : to discover something by searching

travestied : completely misrepresented

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) He describes it in a complex way suggesting that not only was it the best of times, it was also the worst of times, where wisdom and foolishness, belief and incredulity went hand in hand.

ii) The blood wine imagery subverts the traditional religious symbolism of wine as Christ's blood. It suggests a bloody revolution.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Initially their resemblance is used merely as a striking coincidence. Later we see the great significance it has in the novel.

ii) Mme. Defarge's knitting is a symbol of fate which eventually catches up with everyone. Through her knitting, Mme. Defarge keeps an account of all the crimes perpetrated by the aristocracy. Therefore, it serves as a cover for her secret revolutionary activities. It is also a symbol of solidarity between the poor.

iii) Dickens sees the revolution as a negative event which is anarchic and self-destructive. The revolutionaries are depicted by him as cruel fanatics who rejoice when they kill people.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Dr. Manette had maintained an account of the circumstances leading to his imprisonment. This falls in the hand of Defarge who presents these as evidence against two aristocratic brothers who turn out to be Darnay's father and uncle.

ii) The first reason is that Mme. Defarge intends to indict Lucie, her father and her child as part of her scheme to exterminate the Evremonde family. Secondly Dr. Manette relapses into his old condition as a result of the shock of his failure.

iii) For this answer you need to exercise your own judgment. You could think of a positive outcome of the revolution or a negative one. You can also talk about Carton's sacrifice.

UNIT 3 THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND DICKENS

Structure

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will give you an account of:

- what actually happened in France during the revolution
- the ideals that inspired the makers of one of the great revolutions of European history
- how the conservative English press, and two individual writers - Burke and Carlyle generated the images and attitudes that influenced Dickens' representation of the French revolution in a major way.
- Dickens' treatment of the French revolution.

After going through this Unit you will be able to critically compare *A Tale of Two Cities* with both what actually happened in France and the conservative discourse that these happenings generated. You will also be in a position to tackle what is self evidently one of the most important topics in the study of *A Tale of Two Cities*: Dickens' treatment of the French revolution in the novel.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

After reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, you will think of the French revolution as an orgiastic outburst of violence and anarchy that hit the French nation with the suddenness of a tornado or an earthquake. Actually, *A Tale of Two Cities* is only one among many books ─ both fictional and non-fictional ─

that treat the French revolution as an event so cataclysmic that it defies all understanding.

The first striking thing in Dickens' account is that, he draws our attention to the oppressiveness of the aristocracy and indeed holds them primarily responsible for precipitating the upheaval. But Dickens' attitude to the revolution is not sympathetic either. He associates it with bloodshed, revengefulness and the propensity for indiscriminate levelling. We shall see, however that Dickens' treatment of the revolutionaries and, especially of Mme. Defarge is more complex, containing as it does, a real element of admiration together with fear and loathing.

3.2 FRANCE IN THE LAST DECADE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

3.2.1 Origins of the Revolution

The French revolution was not a sudden event at all but something that developed over at least five years. Its origins may be located in 1787 in the "aristocratic attempt to capture state power" at a time when France under the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI faced irresolvable political and economic crises. The aristocratic attempt to gain absolute dominance bitterly antagonized the middle class which had fought long and hard to gain adequate representation in the French Parliament. They now demanded that issues in Parliament be decided by majority voting rather than by the older feudal method of voting by "order".

This issue precipitated the first confrontation between the ancient regime (the older order comprising the king, the nobles, the clergy and between the men who were later to lead the revolution). Six weeks after the Parliament opened --- the middle class deputies constituted themselves and invited all who were prepared to join them as the National Assembly with the right to recast the constitution. If the middle class was able to hold its own against the combined opposition of the king, lords and the clergy, it was because they had behind them the French masses — the labouring poor in the cities, as well as the peasantry. The latter sections had, as many historians have shown, very good reasons to be discontented with the ancient regime. Successive economic crises, prolonged drought conditions, and brutal governance had made the life of the large majority almost unbearable. The entry of the radicalized French masses into the political processes of the era pushed these beyond what the middle class had originally anticipated. The storming of the Bastille ─ a hated state prison symbolizing royal authority ─ in July 1789, suggested that the movement for reform had swelled up into a full-fledged popular revolution.

3.2.2 Reign of Terror

It was the popularisation of the French revolution that first sowed the seeds of future conflict among the revolutionaries. Around 1790 ─ not earlier, certainly not concurrently with the storming of the Bastille, as Dickens seems to imply in *A Tale of Two Cities* ─ these conflicts burst out into the open. Between 1790 and 1794, mass executions were common as a section of the middle class backed by the urban poor and the peasantry tried to consolidate its hold over a fragmenting nation. In the process the Jacobin regime

persecuted not only aristocrats but also ex-revolutionaries, who, frightened or dissatisfied by the direction in which the revolution was moving, had dissociated themselves from it. It is this "Jacobin" phase of the revolution --- often designated as "the reign of terror" --- that is in many accounts, including Dickens', made to stand for the French revolution as a whole. Associated with widespread bloodshed, with the guillotines and the tumbrills, and above all with the "Sans cullotes" the vast if shapeless movement of urban shopkeepers, tiny entrepreneurs and the poor (the Defarges and the other inhabitants of St. Antoine in *A Tale of Two Cities*), Jacobinisin has been surrounded by conservative commentators in a permanent aura of almost mythological horror. But of course this mythification was only the means of shutting off a cooler and more objective analysis of the achievements and failures of the Jacobins. The Sans-cullotes themselves, who have so often been represented as pathological killers, may also be seen as committed political activists who used violence in the interests of the "little men". Again while the Jacobins did rule by terror (until their methods turned in on themselves and precipitated their own downfall) ─ their achievements have been described by one of the historians of the French revolution as "superhuman".

3.2.3 Towards an Egalitarian Society

Finally of course the French revolution for all its excesses was above all a revolution against feudalism and for the establishment of an egalitarian society. It gave the world not only the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", but also the idea of a secular stale where "all citizens (would) have the right to cooperate in the formation of the law".

Check Your Progress 1

i) Briefly outline the origin of the French revolution.

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ii) Describe the role of the Jacobins in the revolution.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

3.3 THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE CONSERVATIVE ENGLISH PRESS

The revolution in France as well as the radicalisation of the working classes in England in the first half of the nineteenth century made official England

deeply apprehensive and this created a whole discourse which sought to paint the events in France in the most horrific terms. Perhaps the most powerful if nameless source of propaganda against the French revolution was the conservative English press. It created the destructively violent imagery that was to be central to all subsequent depictions of the revolution, and its comparisons between the anarchic French and the moderate and orderly British were to find an echo in *A Tale of Two* Cities.

The most far-reaching images that the conservative English Press created of the French revolution centred around violence. A political print of 1803 entitled "The Arms of France" features a guillotine dripping with blood, and in a horrible variation the political cartoonist Gilray depicted a family of Sans-cullotes feasting on dismembered bodies. The idea of orgiastic bloodletting is of course central to the way that the revolution is depicted in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens' treatment of the revolutionaries, however, differs from the stereotypes that appeared in the conservative press. In the newspapers and political pamphlets, typically, the revolutionary was a withered man or woman, disrespectful, hysterical, laughing cynically when heads rolled and always in a "violent haste" to pull everything down. We might recognise in this, a source for the Defarges and the other revolutionaries of St. Antoine, but as we shall see the Defarges and especially Mme. Defarge, is treated with greater complexity in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Finally, an important theme articulated in the conservative English press, and one that has a direct bearing on *A Tale of Two Cities* is the self-congratulatory pitting of English moderation against French anarchy. A handbill published in 1793 sums up this smug attitude. Entitled "The Contrast", it figures "British Liberty" seated calmly with "Religon" and "Mortality" while "French Liberty" identified with Athiesm, Rebellion and Madness, runs through a scene of corpses.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens is never quite as simplistic or as crude as this. He does speak of Paris as "a beautiful city" and of the French as "a brilliant people", and there is an underlying admiration beneath his hatred of Mme. Defarge. Again, although the contempt that the later Dickens had for the mid-Victorian establishment is muted in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it does occasionally break through ─ in the portrayal of Stryver, for instance. Despite these qualifications however, a sense of relief and even smugness about England's stability, its capacity to remain unaffected by the happenings in France does seem to inform the novel.

Check Your Progress 2

i) How did the English press respond to the French revolution?

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ii) How far does Dickens' treatment of the French revolution coincide with or depart from the images created by the English press?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

3.4 BURKE AND THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

The most influential single work against the French revolution, and one that was responsible for transforming the images of violence, cannibalism and unnaturalness scattered throughout the writings on France into "common wisdom" was Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Written in 1790, it attained instant popularity (or notoriety among the radical supporters of the revolution) and as Marilyn Butler says, "its phrasing passed immediately into the English political discourse".

The most striking thing about *Reflections* is indeed its phrasing - the skill with which it is able to use language to distort facts and to imbue the happenings in France with a mythological sense of horror that defies analysis. Burke was a rhetorician (a skilful user of language) by education and practice and he was a very effective speaker in Parliament. He brought all these skills to bear on *Reflections*, enticing readers with the magic of his words and blinding them to what actually happened. In his reply to the *Reflections* Tom Paine angrily wrote that Burke's account was calculated "more for theatre than for argument" and instead of history or truth, Burke gave his readers oratory - "the spouting rant of high-toned declamation."

The distorting power of rhetoric will be an important theme in our discussion of Dickens' representation of the French revolution. As we shall see, Dickens uses imagery and language to dramatise a point of view that does not square up with what actually happened in France.

But Dickens' response to the French revolution does differ from Burke's, in one very important respect. If Burke reacts to the revolutionaries with venom, he is lyrical when he speaks of the aristocracy and especially the king and the queen. Indeed Burke's book may be seen to be an attempt to mobilise opinion in favour of the aristocracy in England, and its ideological underpinnings are basically the feudal notions of hierarchy and chivalry. On the other hand, Dickens, who was consistently anti-aristocratic throughout his career holds the aristocracy primarily responsible for precipitating the revolution. The aristocratic Evremondes in *A Tale of Two Cities* are far worse than the Defarges, and the king, far from being an object of lyrical adulation, is described simply as "a man with a square jaw".

3.5 CARLYLE AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The strongest single influence on the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities* was undoubtedly Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837). Dickens

said that he had read Carlyle's book about 500 times, he visited the places that Carlyle had talked about, and he incorporated, without too much alteration, some episodes from the French revolution. (Dickens' depiction of the execution of Foulon is an example of such incorporation). But more important than these is the impact that Carlyle's conceptualisation of the French revolution had on the novel.

One of the basic features of Carlyle's delineation of the French revolution was that he saw it not so much as something that could be understood in terms of class or economics as an outbreak of incomprehensible cataclysmic forces. As in *A Tale of Two Cities* the revolution in Carlyle's work is often compared to an earthquake or a tempest. Again, the behaviour of the mobs and especially of the Sans-cullotes is an expression of what happens when "the fountains of the great deep boil forth" after "the mad man" confined within "everyman" bursts through "the Earth rind of Habit".

In the French revolution the most horrific form of this elemental-release is the act of devouring. We might recognise in this the familiar Burkean tactic by which the revolution is sought to be enveloped in an impenetrable aura of horror that defies analysis or understanding. But in fact the way Carlyle uses the idea of devouring, points to a larger difference between him and Burke.

Burke had proclaimed his support of the aristocracy in every page of *Reflections*, while moving from the "mobs" to the aristocracy his whole mode of description had shifted from the satiric to the lyrical. In *The French Revolution* on the other hand, the metaphor of devouring applies as much to the aristocracy as to the revolutionaries. Carlyle constantly draws the reader's attention to the oppressiveness and decadence of the aristocracy, and in fact holds the aristocracy responsible for precipitating the revolution: "They have sown the wind", he says of the aristocracy, "and they shall reap the whirlwind". Carlyle, however can see nothing liberating or exhilarating in the "whirlwind". On the contrary, aristocratic oppression and revolutionary retribution are the main links in an endless chain of violence and counter-violence. It is this idea that Carlyle's metaphors seek, above all, to dramatise. In Carlyle's conception of things the ancient regime devoured the flesh of the people, the revolution then devoured the ancient regime and finally the revolution devoured itself.

Despite the very basic ways in which Carlyle's work influenced Dickens', there is one important way in which the two differ. This has to do with the way in which the two view relationships between the French revolution and the situation in England. Writing in the 1830s when conditions in England were, as we have seen, turbulent, Carlyle obsessively drew parallels between the situation in France in the 1790s and England in the 1830s. Dickens, on the other hand, wrote of the revolution in France from the safe distance of the 1860s when, as we have seen, the turbulence of the 30s and 40s had given way to peace and prosperity. Accordingly, Dickens seems far less anxious about the possibility of the events in France repeating in England. In fact Dickens is, as we have seen, much closer to that strand within the discourse on *The French Revolution: A History* that contrasts rather than compares the situations in France and England.

Check Your Progress 3

i) How did Burke depict the revolution in *Reflections on the French Revolution*?

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ii) How does Carlyle's account of the French revolution differ from Burke's?

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iii) In which important respect does Dickens' view of the revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* differ from Carlyle's in *The French Revolution*: *A History?*

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

3.6 THE ARISTOCRACY AND THE POOR IN *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

Let's begin our discussion of Dickens' treatment of the French revolution by quoting a sentence from one of Dickens' letters. "If there is anything certain on earth", Dickens wrote to his friend Forster "I take it, it is that the condition of the French peasantry generally at the day [during the time of the French revolution] was intolerable". Although the peasantry never directly enters the world of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens draws our attention to the terrible situation of the French urban poor. Here is a description of St. Antoine:

Hunger - was prevalent everywhere. Hunger was pushed out of the tall houses, in the wretched clothing that hung upon lines. Hunger was patched into them with straw and rag and wood; Hunger was repeated in every fragment of the small modicum of firewood that the man sawed off. Hunger-stared from the filthy street that had no offal among its refuse of anything to eat. (Book I, Chapter 5)

What is more, the suffering of the poor in *A Tale of Two Cities* is directly related to the exploitativeness of the aristocracy.

Thus while the inhabitants of St. Antoine fight with each other to lap up the red wine spilt on the street, one of the great lords in power at the court drinks his evening chocolate with the help of four men "all ablaze with gorgeous decoration". The luxurious lifestyle of the noble lords is not just contrasted against the miseries of the poor, but it is also depicted as being sustained directly by exploitation. As a state dignitary, Dickens tells us, the

Monsiegneur had one noble idea on the art of governance that was to "tend to his own pocket and power".

Aristocratic oppression in *A Tale of Two Cities* directly fuels revolutionary fires and may, in fact, be said to actually create revolutionaries. Thus it is the contempt and arrogance with which Mosiegneur Evremonde treats the parents of the child whose death he has caused, that sparks off the first act of revolutionary violence. Even more significant is the Monsiegneur's other crime revealed late in the novel. The Monsiegneur's rape of Mme. Defarge's sister does not just signify the oppression of the poor by the aristocracy. It also creates in Mme. Defarge that implacable hatred of the aristocracy that emerges as one of the most frightening aspects of the revolutionary consciousness. The reckless exploitativeness of the aristocracy, the terrible condition of the poor makes the revolution almost inevitable. In *A Tale of Two, Cities* this inevitability is suggested in many ways, by direct commentary, by the imagery and especially by Mme. Defarge's symbolic knitting which anticipates the revolution with "the steadfastness of fate".

3.7 DICKENS' REPRESENTATION OF THE REVOLUTION

Despite recognising its inevitability and the aristocracy's responsibility in precipitating it, Dickens does not justify the revolution, far less sympathize with it. On the contrary, Dickens conceptualises the events culminating in the revolution almost entirely in Carlylean terms. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, as in Carlyle's work, the revolution is above all a reaction to aristocratic oppression; the terrible crop that grows out of the seed that the aristocracy has sown, and as such incorporates the worst features of what it seeks to overthrow. As Dickens puts it in the last chapter of the novel:

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 licence and oppression once again, and it will surely, yield the same fruit according to its kind (BK. III. Ch. 18)

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens uses a whole range of technicalities to paint the revolution in the most lurid of colours. At the most familiar level he draws on the blood-drinking, devouring imagery that informs so much of the nineteenth century English writing on the French revolution, from the conservative pamphlets and newspapers to Carlyle's better-known account. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the blood-wine imagery is introduced somewhat ambiguously. When the impoverished inhabitants of St. Antoine rush to lap up the red wine spilt on the street, we respond above all to their poverty and when a "tall joker", dips his finger in the red wine and scrawls the word "Blood" on a nearby wall we assume that a justifiable connection is being made between an oppressed people and a bloody revolution. On the other hand, however, the new connotation that wine acquires already implicates the people in the act of blood drinking, and when Dickens speaks of "the tigerish smear about the mouth" of one of the revelers it becomes impossible to separate the notion of the revolutionary masses from the idea of cannibalism.

As the novel progresses, the blood imagery is systematically de-linked from its more positive connotations, such as liberation, sacrifice or the idea that revolution is a justifiable response to oppression, and is associated more and more with predatoriness. In Dickens' direct descriptions of the events in France, blood becomes the staple diet of La Guillotine:

Lovely girls, bright women, brown haired, dark haired and grey youths; stalwart men and old; gentle born and peasant born; all red wine for La Guillotine, all daily brought into light from dark cellars of loathsome prisons, and carried to her through the streets, to slake her devouring thirst. (Bk III, Ch.5)

This conception of the revolution as nothing more than a protracted orgy of bloodletting, provides Dickens with the justification of projecting the revolution not as a sequence of real events but as a nightmare. In the scene in which the men and women come to the grindstone to sharpen their weapons, Dickens is interested not in leaving behind for posterity a description of life in Paris during the revolutionary times, as in orchestrating images that create a sense of hell on earth:

The grindstone had a double handle, and turning at it madly were two men, whose faces, as their long hair flapped back when the whirling of the grindstone brought their faces up, were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages in the most barbarous disguise. As these ruffians turned and turned, some women held wine to their mouths that they might drink; and what with dropping blood, and what with dropping wine, and what with them stream of sparks struck out of the stones, all the wicked atmosphere seemed gore and fire. (Book III. Ch. 2)

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, as in so much of the conservative writing on the French revolution, the events of the 1790s are associated not just with blood and gore but also with the complete breakdown of order, both civic and natural. The idea, that the revolutionary legislators were in "a violent haste" to pull everything down, was of course at the heart of Burke's idea of the revolution. In *A Tale of Two Cities* this breakdown of "order" is manifest in the functioning of the revolutionary courts. Dickens describes the jury that tries Darnay as follows:

Looking at the jury and the turbulent audience, he might have thought that the usual order of things was reversed, and that the felons were trying the honest men. (Book III)

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the jury precipitates the most "unnatural" of situation where the testimony of Darnay's own father-in-law becomes the means of condemning him.

The idea of "unnaturalness" in fact underlies a great deal of what Dickens has to say about the French revolution. It is manifest in Dickens' frequent references to the drought conditions which is in fact seen by historians as one of the *causes* of the revolution but which Dickens insinuates as one of its *effects*, in the macabre jokes that grow around the guillotine, but above all in a blurring of gender distinctions which the French revolution seems to have brought about. Almost all the conservative writers on the French revolution had reacted with horror at the "desexualizing" of women during the revolution. Burke had written with loathing about the unnatural acts of

women "lost to all shame", and Carlyle of the violent speech and gestures, of the "manly women" from whose girdle "pistols are seen sticking". In *A Tale of Two Cities* the embodiment of this kind of "unnatural" woman is of course Mme. Defarge, but as we shall see, Dickens' treatment of the revolutionaries and especially of Mme. Defarge is more complex than his treatment of the revolution.

3.8 THE REVOLUTIONARIES IN *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

On the face of it Dickens' treatment of the revolutionaries is consistent with his treatment of the revolution. The revolutionaries are, in fact, seen as part of the drought-stricken post-revolution landscape – their upraised arms are compared at one point to "shriveled branches of trees in a winter wind". This is one of the many instances when Dickens dramatizes the poverty of the revolutionary masses not in order to evoke our sympathy but in order to associate Mme. Defarge and her comrades, as well as their enterprise with a sense of unhealthiness. For Dickens as for many of his middle class contemporaries, the most frightening feature of a revolution based on deprivation is its propensity to destroy rather than build:

The raggedest nightcap, awry on the wretchedest head, had this crooked significance in it: I know how hard it has grown for me, the wearer of this to support life in myself; do you know how easy it has grown for me the wearer of this to betray life in you? Every lean bear arm that had been without work before had this work always ready for it now that it could strike. (Bk.2 Ch. 22)

In these circumstances it is not surprising at all that Dickens sees the revolutionaries as "dark, revengeful and repressed", and that he sees the revolution leading directly to the reign of terror.

Yet lurking behind this obvious dislike for the revolutionaries is a very real, if somewhat frightened admiration. The men and women who gather at the Defarge wine shop are committed to their cause, and confident about their ultimate success; and there is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that the Defarges are not just outstanding organisers but also capable of surviving the onslaughts of a hostile administration.

The most striking figure among the revolutionaries is of course Mme. Defarge. Quite apart from her personal qualities which we will discuss later, what makes Dickens' portrayal of Mme. Defarge so remarkable is that it is not imprisoned within the prejudices that had determined the portrayal of the non-domestic women in the writing of Burke and Carlyle. Thus far from being cast in the Burkean/Carlylean mould of the violent, "mad" revolutionary woman, Mme. Defarge is characterised by her calm determination, her razor sharp powers of observation and her complete dedication. In this sense Mme. Defarge's refusal to stay within the bounds of domesticity suggests not her revolutionary perversity but her independence.

Mme. Defarge has been compared to Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. But unlike Lady Macbeth, her role is never confined to that of a mere instigator or advisor. On the contrary, she is an equal and even dominant partner in the revolutionary enterprise; always capable of overruling her husband at public forums. What sustains Mme. Defarge's

independence is her outstanding leadership qualities. Nothing that has a bearing on the revolution escapes her, and she moves about in St. Antoine like a "missionary", channelising the discontentment of its miserable folk for the cause of the revolution. With his deep antipathy to the revolution, Dickens hates Mme. Defarge for her very strengths. He sees in her unwavering dedication to the revolution, the propensity to sacrifice all human considerations for an abstract cause, and in her determination a cold pitilessness. But the truly remarkable thing is that despite hating her Dickens is still able to pay Mme. Defarge a tribute such as the following:

Of strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty that not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike in others an instinctive recognition of those qualities. (Bk III Ch.4)

3.9 LET US SUM UP

Summing up then, we hope, you can now see that the French revolution was a protracted and complex phenomenon and not a spontaneous cataclysm that Carlyle and other British writers made it out to be. The constant comparisons between the French revolution and a tempest or an earthquake, however, were not innocent, since these implied that the events in France defied all forms of understanding. Moreover, writers as diverse as Burke and Carlyle never hesitated to use metaphors and images and heightened language to subsume the facts and the achievements of the French revolution in an almost mythological sense of horror.

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* comes basically out of this matrix of attitudes, but we hope you have noted how Dickens both draws on but also departs from the writings that taken together constitute the conservative English response to the French revolution.

In this Unit, we have seen in what respects Dickens' treatment of the French revolution differs from that of Burke and Carlyle. We have seen that while Dickens holds the aristocracy responsible for precipitating the revolution, he is not sympathetic to the revolutionaries either. He depicts them in diabolical term, associating them with indiscriminate bloodshed and vengeance. Dickens' treatment of Mme. Defarge, however, is more complex as he treats her with fear and hatred as well as with admiration.

3.10 GLOSSARY

Burke : Edmund Burke (1729-97) British statesman and political theorist, wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

Carlyle : Thomas Carlyle (1795'-1881) British social critic and historian, author of *The French Revolution: A History* (1837)

Cataclysm : violent and sudden change or event

Ideology : ideas of a social or political group

Jacobin : member of a radical, democratic party during the French revolution. The party drew support from the lower classes of Paris and from a network of over 31000 affiliated clubs throughout France.

Matrix : an arrangement

Paine : Thomas Paine (1773-1809), intellectual, revolutionary, idealist, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. Wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791), both as a reply to Burke's view of the French revolution and as a general political philosophy treatise

Subsume : to include as a member of a group or type

Tumbrill : a type of simple cart used for taking prisoners to the guillotine during the French revolution

Underpin : support or give strength to

Implacable : which cannot be satisfied

Perversity : unreasonable opposition to the wishes of others; difference from what is right or reasonable.

Propensity : natural tendency towards a particular (usually undesirable) kind of behaviour

3.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) The French revolution was a battle between the nobility and the common people who had been marginalized and oppressed by the former. This conflict burst out in the form of a revolution which soon became a reign of terror.

ii) The Jacobins were the more radical group who leashed a "reign of terror" Some look at them as pathological killers while others applaud their achievements as committed political activists.

Check Your Progress 2

i) The English press depicted the French revolution to be an extremely violent event. They also pitted the English to be moderate, as against the French, who were shown to be anarchic.

ii) Dickens' does not endorse this view entirely. However, it does seem that he is smug about England's stability.

(You must make your own judgement after reading the novel)

Check Your Progress 3

i) Burke condemns the revolutionaries and praises the aristocracy.

ii) Carlyle talks about the oppression and decadence of the aristocrats and feels that they were responsible for precipitating the revolution.

iii) Dickens' views differ from Carlyle regarding the revolution and the situation in England. Carlyle draws parallels between the situation of France in the 1790s and the England of the 1830s. Dickens does not feel that the events of France could be repeated in England.

UNIT 4 OTHER ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Structure

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we discuss a topic that explores "the two worlds of *A Tale of Two Cities.* By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

- relate to the different aspects of the novel;
- begin to think critically about the contradictions that we find in a writer's work, and
- ask what these mean.

4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE TWO WORLDS OF *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

A Tale of Two Cities is about two worlds (or two "cities", as the title indicates). These are the worlds of England and France, which are compared and contrasted in the opening chapter of the novel. The two nations represent political stability and revolution.

The opposition between these two worlds represents an opposition as well, between two sets of conditions which correspond to England and France, respectively: order and chaos; safety and danger; freedom and imprisonment; life and death. The novel's structure itself is organised around these settings. The central group of characters (Dr. Manette, Lucie, Charles Darnay, and their friends) move from one world to another and in doing so, they pass from one set of conditions to its opposite. Hence, England serves as an escape and refuge from revolutionary France.

Here we shall notice more closely how Dickens' representation of women not only corresponds to these oppositions but, in fact defines them. Each "world" is represented by a woman: the world of England (stability, order, safety, freedom, and life) represented by Lucie Manette; and the world of France depicting the revolution, chaos, danger, imprisonment, and death represented by Mme. Defarge. In a previous unit we've already spoken about

the female "types" in Dickens' fiction, and observed how Lucie Manette and Therese Defarge correspond to these types. Here we see further how each is made to stand for the national/cultural/racial character. Each has a companion - Miss Pross (Lucie's) and "Vengeance" (Mme. Defarge's) --- who more fully exemplifies the characteristics of her national type. (You could try to identify what these characteristics are. Read Book III, Chapters 3 and 14)

The representation of this central pair of opposed women characters corresponds to and structures other oppositions that we shall examine in detail. The values of England, as exemplified by Lucie Manette, are associated with the home, the family, and with individual or personal relationships; whereas revolutionary France, as exemplified by Mme. Defarge, is identified with the streets, with "society" at large, and with impersonal or historical events and forces.

But it becomes obvious to us as readers that these oppositions are not, and cannot be sustained. As the novel's opening chapter itself shows, eighteenth-century England is not a perfect society, or an exemplar for Europe. We see the dangers of travel on the highways in England in Book I; we see the wild behaviour of the English "mob" at Darnay's trail (Book II, Ch.2), and at Roger Cly's funeral (Book II, Ch. 14); we see Dickens' direct attack upon the English complacency displayed by Stryver (Book II, Ch.24).

Tellson's Bank, which is the microcosmic representation of England --- in its resistance to change, its stability, its health, its conservatism is imaged in an ambivalent way. Its building in London is small, dark, underground, and claustrophobic (See Book II, Chapter 1). (It is of course the repository of the wealth of the fleeing French aristocracy, and the French refugees themselves gather there). Tellson's London building resembles the womb, and as such stands for security. But the description also suggests a prison. Even Mr. Lorry's service to the bank, though Dickens often praises it, can be seen as a life-sentence. So we see Dickens' ambivalent attitude towards Tellson's and, by extension, towards England. Similarly, as we shall see, all the other values associated with England via Lucie are called into question, and their opposition to France and the revolution often breaks down.

Conclusion: Apparently, we see two separate worlds in *A Tale of Two Cities*. They are also not identified as separate but are in fact contrasted. At the same time, Dickens does not unnecessarily praise England since he makes it resemble France in a number of important aspects. Central to this blurring of boundaries is the role that women played. We shall look at it in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

i) What are the two "worlds" represented in *A Tale of Two Cities?*

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ii) What do these opposed worlds stand for?

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iii) What values do Lucie Manette and Mme. Defarge exemplify?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit)

4.2 WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

In most social arrangements, women and men traditionally occupy separate "spheres" of activity: women's sphere is the personal and private world of the home and the family, and their activities are reproductive and domestic (child-bearing, child-rearing, running a house), while men's sphere is the public world of the streets and the workplace and their activities are productive and political (labour, manufacture, government). In Victorian literature and value-systems, this separation of the spheres was strictly enforced, and the place of women in the home - while it reduced and trivialised women's roles — also idealised and elevated it. This is the place that Lucie Manette is given in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in line with the heroines of most of Dickens' other novels.

But at times of historical crisis — like war, revolution and struggle — women's participation in public events becomes crucial, as happened in the French revolution. Several historians have noted that women played a key role in revolutionary activities, especially since the popular agitations often centered on lack of food and women were the most hard- hit by this deprivation. The historian George Rude notes, for instance, that "a leading part" in the agitation of September 1789, was played by "the women of the markets and *faubourgs*", it was they who gave a lead to their men folk in the seat march to Versailles on 5th October". For his portrait of Mme. Defarge, Dickens relied to a certain extent on Carlyle's historical portrait of Demoiselle Theroigne; and there were other well-known women leaders of the revolution from whom he could draw for the figure of Mme. Defarge.

Thus women were no longer confined to the world of home and family, but became actors in the larger world of public affairs. What fascinated and repelled English historians of the revolution like Burke and Carlyle was the violence of women in the "Terror". This seemed to them to go against nature itself, to de-sex women, to strip them of their "feminine" qualities of passivity and pity, and to reverse the order of things. Hence their descriptions

of women revolutionaries as shrill and their angry denunciations of them as "monsters," "witches", "harpies", or "vampires".

Dickens follows Burke and Carlyle in his descriptive accounts. In the account of the hanging of Foulon, for instance, we have this long paragraph that highlights the women's attitudes and actions:

... the women were a sight to chill the boldest. From such household occupations as their base poverty yielded, from their children, from their aged and their sick crouching on the bare ground famished and naked, they ran out with streaming hair, urging one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions. Villain Foulon taken, my sister. Old Foulon taken, my mother. Miscreant Foulon taken, my daughter. Then, a score of others ran into the midst of these beating their breasts, tearing their hair, and screaming, Foulon alive. Foulon who told the starving people they might eat grass. Foulon who told my old father that he might eat grass, when I had no bread to give him. Foulon who told my baby it might suck grass, when these breasts were dry with want ... give us the blood of Foulon, give us the body and soul of Foulon, rend Foulon to pieces, and dig him into the ground, that grass may grow from him. With these cries, numbers of the women, lashed into blind frenzy, whirled about, striking and tearing at their own friends until they dropped into a passionate swoon …

In other places, as in the description of the storming of the Bastille, Dickens focused on Mme. Defarge's bloodthirsty behaviour (Book II, Ch.21). What other similar examples can you find in the text?

But Dickens never loses sight of the reasons for the women's violence, as the passage, quoted above, shows. They have borne the brunt of the oppression of the ancient regime precisely as women, in their domestic and familial roles; as women who have seen their children starve, and their husbands, fathers and lovers imprisoned or killed, (See Mme. Defarge's retort to Lucie in Book III, Ch.3: "All our lives, we have seen our sister-women suffer, in themselves and in their children, poverty, nakedness, hunger, thirst, sickness, misery, oppression and neglect of all kinds".)

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the very first act of injustice perpetrated by the aristocracy that we see is the Marquis's coach running over a child in the streets. He is completely indifferent to the grief of the child's parents, and simply tosses a coin to the distraught father as compensation for the loss. It is this act that sets off a chain of violence and counter-violence in the narrative.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, women are shown also as the sexual victims of the aristocracy. The originating act of the action of the novel is the rape of a poor peasant girl by the Evremonde twins; and it is as her sister that Mme. Defarge seeks revenge upon the entire Evremonde clan.

Therefore, Dickens on one level seems to suggest that women are biologically "red in tooth and claw" (that "the female of the species is deadlier than the male" - a claim borne out by Mme. Defarge seen in comparison with her husband). But at a deeper analytic level he also shows that it is their "natural" feelings as women — as sexual victims, as grieving mothers and wives— that provokes them into committing "unnatural" acts of violence and revenge. Whenever we see Mme. Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it

is not within the home, but standing in her wine-shop, or in doorways, or out on the streets. She is not shown as a mother and daughter; even her knitting is a revolutionary act (a secret register), not a domestic or feminine activity. She is active, dynamic, a leader. In all this she is a contrast to Lucie Manette, as we shall see.

Yet Dickens wants to "demystify" this awful woman (i.e. take away the aura of mystery and inscrutability around her). He shows us the crowd of men and women going back to their homes after the hanging of Foulon, to their normal family relations and affections:

Fathers and mothers who had had their full share in the worst of the day, played gently with their meager children; and lovers, with such a world around them and before them, loved and hoped (Book II, Chapter 22).

Similarly, at the end of the novel Mme. Defarge is revealed as a woman seeking revenge for her family's death at the hands of the Evremondes. Though this reduces her stature as a political figure fighting for an abstract cause and her impact as an impersonal force of retribution that Dickens had built up throughout the narrative, it gives her actions a certain sympathetic colouring.

Conclusion: Dickens' ambivalent attitude to the French revolution - his acceptance and rejection of it - may be partly located in his double attitude towards the women of the revolution, and is explained by his extremely complex depiction of Mme. Defarge as their representative.

4.3 THE HOME AND THE STREETS

The "home" in *A Tale of Two Cities* is associated with England and Lucie Manette, and symbolises family affections, safety, security, order, and comfort --- an "inner" world that is a refuge against the world outside. This is how the home that Lucie and her father set up in London is described:

A quainter corner than the corner where the Doctor lived was not to be found in London. There was no way through it, and the front window of the Doctor's lodgings commanded a pleasant little vista of street that had a congenial air of retirement on it ... The summer light struck into the corner brilliantly in the earlier part of the day; but, when the streets grew hot, the corner was in shadow .... It was a cool spot, staid but cheerful, a wonderful place for echoes, and a very harbor from the raging streets (Book II, Ch.6).

Lucie is generally associated with England and her English mother, but as the child also of a French father, she shows the French ability "to make much of little means", as seen in her home — making skills, her use of "many little adornments, of no value but for their taste and fancy ... its effect was delightful". In this house Lucie tends to her father and he slowly recovers from the trauma of his long imprisonment. Lucie was the 'Golden' thread that united him to a Past beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his misery, and the sound of her voice, the light of her face, the touch of her hand, had a strong beneficial influence with him almost always. (Compare the image of the Golden thread with Mme. Defarge's coarse, grey knitting, and the different symbolic associations that the two images have).

Thus Lucie's predominant qualities relate to the home:She is a good home-maker, a dutiful daughter, a good wife and mother, a very traditional

representation of the Victorian fictional heroine, especially as she is found in Dickens' novels.

Yet, this home in London is beset by the forces outside. Lucie herself draws attention to the significance of the echoes and footsteps that she hears in the house: "I have made the echoes out to be the echoes of all the footsteps that are coming by-and-by into our lives". (Book II, Ch.6). As John Gross has pointed out: "Footsteps suggest other people, and in *A Tale of Two Cities* other people are primarily a threat and a source of danger. The little group around Dr. Manette is as self-contained as any in Dickens, but it enjoys only a precarious safety".

As we see later, the inmates of this house become sucked into the vortex of events in France. Lucie enacts the journey from her home twice: the first time to fetch her father back from pre-revolutionary France, the second to rescue her husband from revolutionary France. In Paris, Lucie bravely builds a home that is a replica of her English household in the midst of the chaos all around her, (Book III, Ch.5). But it cannot save and hold her husband. No sooner is he released from prison than he is re-arrested and imprisoned again. Once again footsteps signal the invasion of the world. Lucy hears "strange feet upon the stairs", and they are those of "four tough men in red caps, armed with sabers and pistols'. come to arrest Darnay. Thus Dickens shows the frailty and precariousness of the "home" as a refuge from the "world" outside.

There is yet another unsettling suggestion of the limitations of the home: we find this in Dickens' depiction of Darnay's dilemma. Darnay as an Evremonde by birth and inheritance and yet hating both, seeks refuge in England. But in fact it is the Manette household in Soho−Lucie's love, and the peace he finds there - that lures him away from his responsibilities as he himself realises (Book II, Chapter 24). In some ways then the home ─ as a private retreat ─ is a false option to the world of events in which men and women must participate under historic compulsion.

Dickens marks the differences between women of different classes and circumstances very forcefully in Bk. III, Ch.3, Lucie appeals to Mme. Defarge to save her husband: "0 sister woman, think of me. As a wife and mother." "She 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". Mme. Defarge insists on the differences between their positions:

The wives and mothers we have been used to see ... have not been greatly considered? We have known their husbands and fathers laid in prison and kept from them, often enough? ... Is it likely that the trouble of one wife and mother would be much to us now?

Between Lucie and Mme Defarge there is the difference of class and nation and the historical roles that these dictate which override their common gendered identities as "wives and mothers".

Conclusion: *A Tale of Two Cities* is an unusual Victorian novel in so far as it marks the limits of the "home" in several ways. Yet ultimately Dickens makes Lucie the victor; Mme. Defarge is destroyed and defeated. In Carton's vision at the end of the novel, the revolution passes away, and it is Lucie and

her children and grandchildren who endure. This resolution may not seem to us to be in keeping with Dickens' own depiction of "the home and the streets", but it is by this means that he "saves" the values of the home.

Check Your Progress 2

i) How is Mme. Defarge represented in *A Tale of Two Cities?*

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ii) How docs Lucie Manette symbolise the "home"? What qualities of hers does Dickens admire most?

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iii) How does Dickens assert the values of the home finally in *A Tale of Two Cities*?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit.)

4.4 THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY

The family is a group of closely-related individuals who occupy the private world of the home; 'society' is a large, loose collection of unrelated individuals who constitute the public world of community. Dickens explores the opposition and conflict between the two, and poses the question of human identity in that context: is one's identity to be defined in terms of one's personal and family relationships, or in terms of one's class and social position?

The question is central to Darnay's dilemma in the novel. Which is his "real" identity, the name he is born to, or the name he chooses? When he is arrested, indicted and condemned to die for the crimes of his ancestors, the Biblical saying that "The sins of the father are visited upon the sons", comes true. Ironically, Dr. Manette who fights hard to save Darnay as the husband of his beloved daughter unwittingly betrays him as the son and nephew of the hated aristocratic twins who had him imprisoned in the Bastille. In the case of Lucie too it is a question, as Mme. Defarge points out, whether she is to be saved as the daughter of her father or condemned as the wife of her

husband. For the revolutionaries it is not the individual's actions that decide his/her guilt or innocence, but his/her social position.

Dickens also regarded the family as the constitutive unit of society (i.e. that which makes it up or forms it). Just as a stone dropped in a pond will cause ripples that irresistibly spread outward, the disruption of the family will lead to larger social disturbances. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the two major criminal acts committed by the aristocracy (both in the person of the Marquis d' Evremonde) - the killing of the poor child, the rape of the peasant girl - are acts that disregard family bonds and feelings among the poor. The third crime, the unjust imprisonment of Dr. Manette also tears a young man away from his wife and unborn child. The Marquis does not consider these to be serious crimes.

The possession by a high-placed person of any woman of the peasant class was a traditional aristocratic privilege (known as *le droit du seigneur*). But the brother of the raped girl, and later her sister (Mme. Defarge), question this privilege. Speaking the new language of rights, justice and equality, they attack the Evremondes. (See Bk. III, Ch.10). Similarly the poor man, Gaspard, kills the Marquis in revenge for the latter's causing his child's death, thus setting off a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence.

The revolt of the peasantry is viewed in the light of generational revolt. This is the reason why Gaspard's crime is compared to parricide. (Bk: II, Ch. 15). Dickens, like many other historians of the time, diagnosed the chief cause of the French revolution as the breakdown of the old feudal order, in which the relationship between the classes was imaged as a paternal one. "Two revolutions, one generational and the other political, determine the structure of *A Tale of Two Cities*," as a critic, observes (Albert D Hutter). The father-son conflict that is depicted in Charles Darnay's quarrel with his uncle the Marquis portends the social upheaval that is to follow.

Conclusion: Dickens does not undertake any deeper analysis of the large-scale historical forces that caused the French revolution. Questions of identity and images of generational conflict - located within the matrix of the family as social structure ─ serve his fictional purposes adequately. He is forced to rely upon a number of coincidences and forced connections in order to compress this vast historical phenomenon within the novel. Thus Mme. Defarge must be revealed as none other than the sister of the peasant girl raped by the Evremonde brothers; Dr. Manette's son-in-law is the son and nephew of the very men who had sent him to prison; Defarge is Dr. Manette's old servant and the one who finds his hidden document in the Bastille and so on. When Mme. Defarge argues with her husband that the revolutionary must rise above personal loyalty and affection for the individual who may be a 'class-enemy' (see Bk. II, Ch.16), Dickens is able to discredit her as a cold and heartless woman. But the novel nonetheless leaves us with the disturbing possibility that Mme. Defarge raises: that identities and loyalties may extend beyond the family into that larger community called "society".

4.5 THE PERSONAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NOVEL

We are now led to ask how far the two narrative lines in the novel, the personal and the political (i.e. the story of Dr. Manette and his family on

the one hand, and the events of the French revolution on the other) are integrated.

What are the connections between the two? How does Dickens use one to throw light upon the other? Are they merged or kept distinct from each other? Which is given prominence? We are led to think *of A Tale of Two Cities* as a historical novel since its events are laid in a period much earlier than the date of the book. Dickens is one of the great bourgeois realist novelists and as such, as Lawrence Frank puts it, "he imagines historical situations in domestic, familial terms". He places a group of characters at the centre of the events in France in the last three decades of the 18th century. But their roles are largely those of victims than agents. The agents of the revolution — i.e. the leaders and participants, the revolutionaries — are only lightly sketched, except for the Defarges. Dickens uses two distinctively different narrative techniques for the two stories — in the Manette story he shows psychological depth in characterisation, interesting plot development, and subtle moral schema; whereas for the narrative of the revolution he uses descriptive set-pieces (the breaking of the wine-cask, the storming of the Bastille, the hanging of Foulon, etc.), rhetorical writing, and satirical portraits (Monseigneur, the Marquis, the wood-sawyer, the three Jacques), etc.

The effect of this separation results in the kind of opposition that we are now familiar with in *A Tale of Two Cities.* But this opposition does not really result in a mutual critique of the personal and the political as we might expect it to. By way of contrast we can look at two other works that undertake this kind of critique. In a great poem of the Victorian period, "Dover Beach", the poet Matthew Arnold posits the love of two human beings for each other as the only reality in the face of war and destruction. In a novel of a later period, *A Passage to India* (1922), E. M. Forster shows, on the contrary, that the friendship of two well-meaning men, one English and the other Indian, is not possible under conditions of imperial conquest and rule. In these works a genuine engagement between the values of personal life and the forces of history takes place, but we do not find this in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens' analysis of the revolution is phrased in terms of a moral disease, or viewed as a cycle of action and reaction. Such a cycle logically could have no end, i.e. there could be no resolution for it in its own terms within fictional representation. Dickens' social criticism was always based upon moral premises, and when he thought of social change it was not in revolutionary terms, but in terms of a "change of spirit" (as George Orwell argued). Therefore, as George Woodcock points out, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the alternatives to the political saga of "oppression and upheaval" are to be found only in the examples of "human decency and human brotherhood" that the personal narrative provides. Therefore, Dickens seems to suggest that if Darnay's acute conscience, Dr. Manette's integrity, Lucie's domestic steadfastness, Carton's heroic sacrifice, Mr. Lorry's and Miss Pross's loyalty — prevailed, then revolutions would not take place.

It is a weak "solution" to the deep-seated social problems posed by the revolution. Only Carton's sacrifice has a transcendent religious significance:

the endless cycle of evil can be ended only if a Christ-like figure emerges to assume the burdens of all lesser human beings. But Carton's death is too closely linked to his love for Lucie and to his own ennui to be a true "sacrifice" in this superhuman sense, and it strikes us also as being more an element of plot resolution than an essential aspect of the novel's meaning.

Therefore, critics have by and large remained critical of the integration of the two strands of the novel. George Lukacs noted a dissociation between the moral-political and the personal psychological dimensions of the novel, and felt that Dickens weakened the connections between the character's lives and the events of the French revolution. Edgar Johnson criticised the ending of the novel as a poor display of Dickens' radicalism: "Instead of merging, the truth of revolution and the sacrifices are made to appear in conflict." The personal crisis, he argues, usurps the political message. The revolution becomes "simply the agency of death". Another critic, Alexander Welsh, also argues that our interest at the end is made to shift to the fate of the main characters, and ignores the larger movement of the revolution that goes on unaltered. Lawrence Frank points to the implications of the limits of the "family drama": "Dickens (in depicting) a national struggle as a generational one, obscures the significance of ideology and class".

We may be dissatisfied with other aspects of the ending as well, such as the death of Mme. Defarge. The rescue of Charles Darnay, and the family's escape to England, have all the elements of suspense and thrill that a good adventure story does. The popularity of *A Tale of Two Cities* has depended in large part on its success as a romance, melodrama and adventure, with the revolution ultimately serving only as a backdrop to the story of the chief characters.

Though Dickens raises interesting and important questions about oppression, revolution and social change *in A Tale of Two Cities*, he finally abandons these questions. In the personal stories of Dr. Manette, and Charles Darnay, there are real possibilities of connecting personal and political issues. But instead Dickens shifts the 'focus of interest' at the end to Sydney Carton (who has little to do with the revolution). He suggestively critiques the conservative values of "home," family, the traditional domestic heroine, and the state of England by drawing their limits and exposing their limitations. But at the end of the novel he re-asserts these values by killing Mme. Defarge ignobly, Sydney Carton nobly, and effecting Darnay's and Manette's escape to England.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have seen how the novel operates between two worlds: the worlds of England and France, safety and danger, life and death, order and chaos, freedom and imprisonment. We have also discussed how these oppositions are reflected in Dickens depiction of the main women characters in the novel — Lucie Manette and Mme Defarge. However, these differences are not described in simple black and white terms but in subtle shades of grey. This unit has also focused on how Dickens has used different narrative techniques to develop the two strands in the novel, that is, the personal and the political.

And finally we have seen that even though Dickens raises important questions about oppression, revolution and social change, he shifts the focus in the end from the political to the personal.

4.7 GLOSSARY

beset : attached from all directions

claustrophobia : fear of being enclosed in a small limited space

distraught : disturbed and troubled almost to the point of madness

ennui : tiredness caused by lack of interest; boredom

inscrutable : mysterious

parricide : murder of one's own parent especially father or other near relative

portend : sign of warning

unwittingly : without knowing or intending to

4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) England and France

ii) England seems to stand for political stability and France for revolution.

iii) Lucie exemplifies home, family and relationships while Mme. Defarge exemplifies vengeance.

Check Your Progress 2

As a complex character ─active, dynamic on one hand-vengeful and cruel on the other ─ yet presented in a slightly sympathetic manner. (Read the novel and see how you would place her).

Lucie is a good maker, a dutiful daughter, a good wife and mother. Dickens seems to admire these qualities.

Given though there are limits to the "home", Dickens asserts the values of the home by making Lucie the victor as she epitomizes the home.

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