

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

Extended Essay

Research Question:

To what extent is “A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens a historical or a romance novel.

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Abstract

This extended essay aims to analyse “A Tale of Two Cities”, written by Charles Dickens in 1859, from two different perspectives: historical novel and romantic novel. The novel is set in the period of French Revolution, and the historical setting is an important aspect of this novel. There is also a romantic relationship developing between two young people. This dual nature of the book, the fact that it encompasses love, guilt, compassion, justice, sacrifice, revenge and loyalty, and the detailed and realistic narration of the French revolution were the main reasons behind the selection of this novel. This essay compares the historical features and the romantic features of the novel. Historical novel and romantic novel types of literature was first defined, and then the novel was examined according to the definitions.

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Introduction

Charles Dickens is one of the most important figures in British literature, especially that of Victorian era. He was best known for his novels *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), *David Copperfield* (1850), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1860-1861). The main qualities of his novels were the depth of his characters, his narration of the conditions of the working class, his humour and his critical point of view. He is a writer of London, which always has an important role in most of his novels.

“A Tale of Two Cities” is one of his best known works, although it lacks Dickens’ usual humour. The novel was first published as a serial in 1859 in Dickens’ periodical *All the Year Round*. Dickens used “*The French Revolution: A History*” by Thomas Carlyle as his basic source for historical information and created a plot developing with interesting and detailed scenes. Dickens even mentions Carlyle’s book in the preface, along with “*The Frozen Deep*”, from which he “*first conceived the main idea of this story.*” The novel has become one of the most important texts about the French Revolution.

The main characters are Charles Darnay, a French aristocrat who has moved to England and later becomes a victim of the revolution despite his innocence; Sydney Carton, a British lawyer, who in the end sacrifices his life and dies to save Darnay for his love to Lucie; Lucie Manette, who is loved by both Darnay and Carton and later becomes Darnay’s wife; and Lucie’s father, Dr Manette, kept in Bastille and released after the revolution.

The first book of the novel, “Recalled to Life”, starts in 1775. Jarvis Lorry, an employee of a bank, meets Lucie Manette to tell her that her father Dr Manette is alive and that he has been

prisoned in Bastille. They travel to Paris and meet the Defarges who lead a revolutionary group, in their wine shop. When Monsieur Defarge takes them to the prison, they see that Dr Manette has lost his touch with reality and he hardly recognizes her daughter. They take him back to England.

The second book, "The Golden Thread", starts in 1780, with the trial of Charles Darnay for treason. Darnay is cleared of the false claims when a witness can not distinguish between Darnay and Sydney Carton, who is present in the court and looks exactly like Darnay.

In Paris, Marquis St. Evermonde accidentally kills the son of Gaspard, a peasant. He then arrives at his chateau and meets his nephew, Darnay, has changed his surname as he did not want to be associated with his family. They argue about their attitudes to the poor and their perspectives of justice. In the night, Gaspard murders the Marquis.

Darnay returns to London and asks Dr. Manette's permission to marry Lucie. Carton tells Lucie that he loves him, even though he knows she will never love him as such. When Lucie and Darnay are getting married, Darnay tells his story to Dr Manette and Dr Manette lapses back into his previous state.

On July 14th, 1789, the Defarges participate in the storming of the Bastille. Monsieur Defarge goes to the cell where Dr Manette was imprisoned, and searches for something.

In 1792, Mr Lorry receives news from France; a servant of the late Marquis is in prison and asks help from Darnay. Darnay goes to France to try and save him.

In the third book, “The Track of a Storm”, Darnay is accused of immigrating to England and is imprisoned. His wife, daughter and Dr Manette travel to Paris with their entire household, and with Mr Lorry they try to free Darnay. Darnay’s trial takes place after more than a year. Dr Manette is well known as a result of the eighteen years he spent in the Bastille and he manages to get Darnay released. But Darnay gets arrested again the same day and has another trial right away with new charges. The Defarges are responsible for this and during the trial, a letter found in the Bastille is used against him. Dr Manettes realises this is the statement he wrote while in prison.

Sydney Carton appears in the trial in Paris and he tries to help Darnay. At the trial, Monseieur Defarge identifies Darnay as Marquis St Evermonde and the reads Dr Manette’s letter. The letter tells that Dr Manette was in prison beacuse of Darnay’s family. Dr Manette is devastated, but he can not save Darnay no matter what he says. Darnay is sentenced to be guillotined. Dr Manette spends the night trying to save Darnay and failing to do that, he goes back to his lost state.

Carton overhears the plans of Madame Defarge to get Lucie and their daughter arrested as well. He forces Lorry to leave Paris immediately with Darnay’s family and Dr Manette. In the morning, he visits Darnay in the prison, drugs him and have him carried out. He stays in the prison pretending to be Darnay since they look exactly alike. Unconscious Darnay is brought to the coach of his family with Carton’s papers and they leave Paris together. Madame Defarge goes to their residence to catch them, but she can not find them. Instead, Lucie’s governess is there, they have a fight and Madame Defarge gets killed with her own pistol.

In the end Carton is executed with the guillotine.

Historical Novel and Features of “A Tale of Two Cities” as a Historical Novel

The main characteristic of a historical novel is that the story is set in historical events. Usually, real events are used with the addition of fictional characters. Historical setting may only be the background for the story, giving the characters a world to live in. But sometimes, historical characters are used may live in a fictional setting. Historical novels gives the spirit of the period, pays attention to details, captures the manners and social, political, cultural conditions. They usually present real events from the point of view of the people living at that time.

“A Tale of Two Cities” is set in in London and Paris, between 1775 and 1790. The French Revolution is the main theme of the novel. The story uses the real events during that period, and adds fictional characters and their stories to the plot.

The story starts with: *“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, was the epoc of belief, it was the epoc of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”* (Dickens, 3) This paragraph is about the social conditions of the period. It was the beginning of the Industrial age, the middle class was growing. Aristocracy was still effective, and the lower class were very poor, uneducated and unemployed. Crime, robbery and murder was common.

There are references to real places in London, and in Paris. The Old Bailey, where Darnay had his first trial, is a real court in London, and Tellson's bank is based on a real bank called Thelusson's Bank. Temple Bar was a stone gate in London, where the heads and limbs of executed criminals were publicly displayed on.

The social situation of France is portrayed in detail. Before the revolution, there were two distinct groups in France, the peasants and the aristocracy. An example for the situation of the peasants is the wine scene in the first book: *“Some men kneeled down, made scoops of their two hands joined, and sipped, or tried to help women, who bent over their shoulders, to sip, before the wine had all run out between their fingers. Others, men and women, dipped in the puddles with little mugs of mutilated earthenware, or even with handkerchiefs from women's heads, which were squeezed dry into infants' mouths; others made small mud- embankments, to stem the wine as it ran; others, directed by lookers-on up at high windows, darted here and there, to cut off little streams of wine that started away in new directions; others devoted themselves to the sodden and lee-dyed pieces of the cask, licking, and even champing the moister wine-rotted fragments with eager relish.”* (Dickens, 47-48)

The aristocrats had the money and power, and the peasant despised them, a man yells to Monseigneur, *“‘I devote you,’* said this person, stopping at the last door on his way, and turning in the direction of the sanctuary, *‘to the Devil!’*” (Dickens, 189) The peasants didn't have any liberties, and were not allowed to participate in the government. All these were the reasons behind the reactions of peasants to the aristocracy and the base for revolution.

There are historical characters mentioned in the novel as well: King George III, the King of England and his wife, Charlotte Sophia: *“There was a King with a large jaw and a Queen*

with a plain face on the thrown of England” (Dickens, 3), and Miss Pross says *“The short and the long is that I am subject of his Most Gracious Majesty King George the third.”* (Dickens, 514).

Some specific details of the French revolution are mentioned in the novel. Louis XVI, King of France and his wife, Marie Antoinette were executed with guillotine in 1793. *“Now, breaking the unnatural silence the whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king, and now, in it seemed almost in the same breath, the head of his fair wife which had had eight weary months of imprisoned widowhood and misery to turn it gray”* (Dickens, 483). Another example is the storming of the Bastille. The famous prison was captured by revolutionaries and pulled down. *“‘Come, then!’ cried Defarge, ‘Patriots and friends, we are ready! The Bastille!’”* (Dickens, 380) The “red caps”, worn by the supporters of the Revolution, is another example of details of the revolution. *“...Darnay complied, and was taken back to the guard-house, where other patriots in rough red caps were smoking, drinking, and sleeping, by a watch-fire.”* (Dickens, 437) The use of guillotine, is frequently mentioned in the novel. *“The ridges thrown to the side and to that, now crumble in and close behind the last plough as it passes on, for all are following to the Guillotine”.* (Dickens 662-663).

Romance Novel and Features of “A Tale of Two Cities” as a Romance Novel

The primary focus of a romance novel is the development of the relationship and romantic love between two people. There may be other plots in the novel, but the conflict and the climax of the novel should be related to this relationship and love. Another common aspect of a romance novel is that it should have a positive outlook to life and a happy ending. These Romance novels usually reward the good and punish the evil.

In “A Tale of Two Cities”, the main romantic relationship is between Darnay and Lucie. They meet during their trip to France and Lucie becomes the witness for Darnay in his trial, portraying him very positively. “ *The prisoner was open in his confidence with me – which arose out of my helpless situation – as he was kind, and good, and useful to my father.*” (Dickens, 123)

Darnay is also impressed with Lucie and talks to several people about Lucie. Then, in the novel, their relationship progresses, Darnay frequently visits the Manette residence and falls in love with Lucie. “*He had loved Lucie Manette from the hour of his danger. He had never heard a sound so sweet and dear as the sound of her compassionate voice; he had never seen a face so tenderly beautiful, as hers when it was confronted with his own on the edge of the grave that had been dug for him.*” (Dickens, 228-229) Darnay talks to Dr Manette about his feelings and asks his permission. “*Dear Doctor Manette, I love your daughter fondly, dearly, disinterestedly, devotedly. If ever there were love in the world, I love her. You have loved yourself; let your old love speak for me!*” (Dickens, 232) The couple gets married. “*And*

I am very happy to-night, dear father. I am deeply happy in the love that Heaven has so blessed—my love for Charles, and Charles's love for me.” (Dickens, 330).

They live happily for a while, having a daughter. *“That time passed, and her little Lucie lay on her bosom. Then, among the advancing echoes, there was the tread of her tiny feet and the sound of her prattling words. Let greater echoes resound as they would, the young mother at the cradle side could always hear those coming. They came, and the shady house was sunny with a child's laugh, and the Divine friend of children, to whom in her trouble she had confided hers, seemed to take her child in his arms, as He took the child of old, and made it a sacred joy to her.”* (Dickens, 371)

Then, there is the hardship they have to go through; Darnay is in prison in Paris, and everyday, Lucie goes to spot where he can see her from the window. *“From that time, in all weathers, she waited there two hours. As the clock struck two, she was there, and at four she turned resignedly away. When it was not too wet or inclement for her child to be with her, they went together; at other times she was alone; but, she never missed a single day.”* (Dickens, 489) Darnay has his trial, and after a series of events, he gets free, and they are happy in the end.

There is also the love Carton feels for Lucie. *“I wish you to know that you have been the last dream of my soul. ... I have had unformed ideas of striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking off sloth and sensuality, and fighting out the abandoned fight. A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down, but I wish you to know that you inspired it.”* (Dickens, 265)

And in the end, he sacrifices his life for Lucie. *“I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more. I see Her with a child upon her bosom, who bears my name. I see her father, aged and bent, but otherwise restored, and faithful to all men in his healing office, and at peace. I see the good old man, so long their friend, in ten years’ time enriching them with all he has, and passing tranquilly to his reward. I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, their course done, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other’s soul, than I was in the souls of both.. ... 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.’”* (Dickens, 668-669)

Conclusion

“A Tale of Two Cities” written by Charles Dickens, has the features of both a historical novel and a romance novel.

In the historical context, the story is set in the atmosphere of the French Revolution, in London and Paris. The revolution is not only a background, but also defines the progress of the story. The murder of the Marquis, Monseieur Defarge participating in the storming of the Bastille, the trials of Darnay, execution of Carton with guillotine, are all integral parts of the story. The characters are mainly fictional, but they are realistic enough to be actually living in that period. The details are vivid and these have made “A Tale of Two Cities” one of the most important novels on French Revolution.

“A Tale of Two Cities” is also a romance novel. There is a developing relationship between Darnay and Lucie. The book tells us how and where they met, how they get closer and how they feel about each other. The story continues as they get married, and Lucie travels to France when Darnay gets arrested there. She waits near the prison every single day for more than a year so that her husband can see her, and kisses the prison wall. The love of Carton for Lucie and his self-sacrifice at the end of the book also adds to the romantic elements of the novel.

The book does not have a real happy ending. Carton sacrifices himself and dies. But Dickens makes the final feeling positive with the last thoughts of Darnay, when he says “*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.”(Dickens, 669) Additionally, Lucie and Darnay escapes together, and the good is rewarded. But the conflict and the climax of the book are not primarily romantic.

In these aspects, it is possible to say that, “A Tale of Two Cities” is more of a historical novel than a romance novel because the historical context is much more important than the romantic context.

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