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TOPIC – **A TALE OF TWO CITIES**

BY DR. PRABHAT RANJAN KARN

ASSOC. PROF., DEPT. OF ENGLISH,

DR. L. K. V. D.COLLEGE, TAJPUR

DICKEN’S ART OF CHARACTERISATION IN “A TALE OF TWO CITIES”

In A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens repeatedly contrasts characters in stark terms: if one seems virtuous, then the other will be cruel and pitiable. Dickens then goes on to show that the virtuous and cruel characters are not as different as they seem. Like these pairs of characters, the cities of London and Paris prove to be surprisingly similar in Dickens’s novel. By establishing a pattern of false dichotomies, or contrasting pairs, Dickens warns that London may have to confront the same problems that tormented revolutionary France.

Readers often remember A Tale of Two Cities for its comic-book juxtapositions of good and bad characters, upright

citizens and unrepentant sinners. Noble Darnay and vulgar Carton appear to be inverse reflections of each other, their physical similarities underscoring their obvious spiritual differences. Darnay marries, starts a family, and travels to France to help a friend; Carton drinks heavily and curses his wasted life. The two most prominent women in the novel—Lucie and Madame Defarge—live by conflicting moral codes. Golden-haired, pure-hearted Lucie exclaims that she has to kneel to her “honoured father,” whereas the dark, cold Madame invests all her energy in cataloguing the men she wants to kill. Dickens also contrasts the Madame with the saintly Miss Pross, who would never leave behind her motherly duties to begin a reign of terror. These pairs of polar opposites appear throughout the novel.

Despite their unforgettable differences, Dickens’s dichotomous characters have many beliefs and attributes in common. For example, Carton and Darnay share a deep love for Lucie and a sense of discomfort in regard to the past. (Carton regrets his drinking, and Darnay regrets his family ties.) Madame Defarge’s history—revealed long after we meet her—includes a great deal of personal tragedy, and Dickens makes clear that the Madame acts on the same feelings of love and loyalty that motivate Lucie throughout the novel. Miss Pross and Madame

Defarge share a superhuman commitment to their goals, to the extent that neither surrenders in a climactic gunfight over Lucie. Again and again, Dickens emphasizes the similarities between his saintly and villainous characters.

Like these falsely dichotomous characters, the cities of Paris and London share several unexpected problems, traditions, and open wounds. At first, the cities seem wildly different. Paris is witness to brutal class conflicts, whereas British citizens are not whispering about bloody revolution. The novel's opening scenes encourage us to see London as Paris's superior neighbor: Lucie, the beautiful Londoner, rescues her father from a dingy Parisian prison and declares that the best possible medicine is to "bring him home." Dickens associates London with the Darnays—a law-abiding, happily married couple with children—whereas he repeatedly links Paris to the Defarges—a nefarious husband and wife who distrust each other. But as the story unfolds, the differences between the cities begin to break down. London, Dickens reminds us, has recently had a wave of crime and capital punishment, and the anarchic British chimney-sweep—accusing passersby of treason for "the pleasure of wreaking vengeance"—closely resembles the deranged Parisian peasants who trample one another to drink from a broken cask of wine. London is not

the tranquil and emphatically un-Parisian capital that it once seemed to be.

By establishing a pattern of odd, unpredictable doubles, Dickens reinforces his idea that London may fall victim to the crises of the French Revolution. Dickens, the son of a poor man, resented the harsh treatment of Britain's impoverished citizens, and he used his novels to plead for economic justice. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, he shows that the world is full of misleading opposites: Heroes and villains alike must struggle with prejudices, doubts, and troubled pasts. The injustices that drove French peasants to wage war against the aristocracy could cause the same problems in England. Dickens leaves us with the haunting image of Lucie, knitting in her comfortable London home, but straining to hear distant, French footsteps in the streets.
