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2. Heroism in A Tale of Two Cities

In Dickens’, A Tale of Two Cities, the identity of the hero is quite complicated if not controversial. Of course, some readers would argue against this, claiming that it is quite obvious that Sydney Carton is the main if not the only hero in the story. To this claim, I would like to partially concede defeat because it does seem that Dickens intended Sydney Carton’s sacrifice to be remembered as the most prominent and heroic one. However, calling him the only hero in the story would be stretching the truth simply because our definition of a ‘hero’ would be slightly vaster than the traditional one.

Certainly, when we adhere to the traditional notion of a hero only being one who is noble, we are also rejecting Sydney Carton’s status as the main hero. This is essentially ironic because at first, the character of Sydney Carton is meant to appear as an alcoholic wastrel and not an angelic hero. Thus, the definition of a hero will be dependent on whether the character exhibits courage in moments of crisis as well as their trajectory of good deeds. In this regard, the readers must consider the characters of Charles Darnay, the Manettes, Mr. Lorry and even the Defarges as possible heroes in their own right.

Indeed, we can first start by looking at perhaps the most unproblematic and upright character, Charles Darnay. From the beginning of the story, the readers see Charles Darnay as the epitome of the qualities of justice and civility which is ironic considering the generational baggage he comes with. Being the nephew of Marquis Evrémonde has placed Darnay in inexplicable distress throughout the novel. Darnay’s identity as a Frenchman makes him a target as a possible spy which he is accused of in the Old Bailey Court by Barsad and Cly. Darnay’s identity as a French aristocrat particularly from the Evrémonde family makes him a target of revolutionaries where he is arrested in La Force Prison. Thus, Darnay’s identity as a Frenchman allows him no reprieve in either city in Pre- or Post-revolutionary France. By creating these tough conditions for Darnay, Dickens arouses sympathy in the reader and makes them root for him as a possible hero. This technique proves even more effective when Dickens employs the traditional heroic qualities of honesty, responsibility, and good character in Darnay.

Undoubtedly, Darnay’s heroic qualities are put on display for almost the entire novel and the readers certainly begin to consider him as a main hero when he tells the truth of his identity to Mr. Manette and asks for Lucie’s hand in marriage: “No, dear Doctor Manette. Like you, a voluntary exile from France; like you, driven from it by its distractions, oppressions, and miseries; like you, striving to live away from it by my own exertions, and trusting in a happier future; I look only to sharing your fortunes, sharing your life and home, and being faithful to you to the death.” (Dickens, 139) This particular dialogue allows the readers to imagine the kind of ideal male hero Dickens wants to portray: one who comes clear about his dark, tainted past (which he is not even responsible for) and one who is a loving family man.

However, almost Darnay’s almost idyllic caricature is somewhat besmirched by his unrelenting sense of responsibility which borders at times on foolishness. This is of course, the case when he fails to gauge the violence and vengeance of the revolutionaries and resolves to go save his steward, Gabelle. The readers could possibly blame this error of judgement on sheer naivety and label it a subliminal act of heroism. Nevertheless, it would not be wrong to claim that Darnay’s renunciation of his estate and his familial ties to Marquis Evrémonde proved to be a useless act and was largely unneeded because he was still incarcerated and killed for his family’s sins. Lawrence Frank in his essay on the “Dickens' ‘A Tale of Two Cities’: The Poetics of Impasse” supports this by noting that: " Although it is done, it is as if it had not been done. Darnay is a " parricide " who has not accepted the implications and consequences of his act. He has defied the primal taboo and has achieved nothing.” Indeed, Darnay’s very denial of his identity as a French aristocrat proves to be his weakness as a courageous hero because he fails to challenge the French regime and instead chooses to hide in London. This is supported by Darnay who acknowledges the cowardice in his actions when he faces his uncle, the Marquis of Evrémonde: “bound to a system that is frightful to me, responsible for it, but powerless in it.” (Dickens, 129)

This claim could be countered by saying that Darnay’s renunciation of his title and wealth adds a noble element to his characterization and redeems if not differentiates from the indifference of his cruel familial regime. Certainly, Darnay’s charm lies in his sense of justice which is ironically also retained in his parallel double and foil, Sydney Carton.

This brings us to the discussion and analysis of the ‘main hero’ of the novel. Interestingly, when the readers compare Sydney Carton with Charles Darnay, the former seems to appear as a rather undesirable antithesis. This can be seen in Carton’s first meeting with Darnay after the trial where he surmises that “you hate the fellow (Darnay)” because “he shows you what you have fallen away from and what you could have been.” Carton’s self-deprecating and rather unheroic pity party remains throughout the novel when he mentions time and again that he is: "a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me" (Dickens, 89).

Carton’s rather pitiful trajectory is highlighted in his relationship with Stryver where he does all the work for him but fails to reach the same level of honor as him. Through this point in the story, the readers recognize that Carton seems to be living as somewhat of a jackal which is "an animal not destined by nature to exist and carrying with it the provision for death." Such a symbolically hybrid form perfectly captures Carton's morbid alienation, which drives him unpredictably between self-hatred and self-pity.” (Petch, The Business of a Barrister in A Tale of Two Cities) Certainly, while Carton’s alienation and self-hatred paints him as somewhat of a loser, it also depicts his potential as an underdog. Some readers might even go as far as to say that Carton doing Stryver’s work is not due to Carton’s inability to find or being careless about work. Instead, it might be out of unrelenting devotion to Stryver – an emotion that seems to echo in his relationship with Lucie Manette as well.

Certainly, Sydney Carton’s relationship dynamic is intensely obsessive at worst and nobly self-sacrificing at best. For Carton, Lucie acts as the ‘golden thread’ or the ray of hope in his life and his desire to be a better man. Unfortunately, Carton’s limitations as a mortal hero come into play when he admits defeat with his Achilles heel of a so- called ‘decadent’ lifestyle. In his confession to Lucie Manette, he says : “If it had been possible, Miss Manette, that you could have returned the love of the man you see before yourself—flung away, wasted, drunken, poor creature of misuse as you know him to be—he would have been conscious this day and hour, in spite of his happiness, that he would bring you to misery, bring you to sorrow and repentance, blight you, disgrace you, pull you down with him.” (Dickens,156) Carton’s admittance of his defeat as the possible suitor and lover of Lucie should place him as a failing second lead. Surprisingly, though, this had made him admirable in the eyes of the readers because Carton knows his toxic lifestyle and instead of selfishly binding her to him, he chooses to selflessly liberate Lucie of the burden to love him back. This places Carton at a strangely noble standpoint where he is admired enough to be considered as the self-sacrificing hero. This status is of course solidified by his redeeming sacrifice at the end.

Carton’s role as the sacrificial Jesus Christ of the novel is interesting because Dickens does seem to use him for prophetic purposes. Towards the end when he is about to have his head chopped by the guillotine in exchange for Darnay, Carton says : “I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” …. “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. (Dickens, 389) Carton’s optimistic prophecy while being in the role of the ‘Resurrection Man’ adds a rather divine quality in his character which goes beyond the limitation of the common mortal hero. Hutter adds onto this particular Christ like nature of Carton by mentioning that: “Carton's role, both as a "double" to the hero and as a melodramatic scapegoat at the close, develops the dual conflicts of the novel; indeed, much of the sentimentality of Carton-as- Christ is derived from his conversion, via Lorry, into the good son and the good conservative. Carton's solution is that of any son-or class- that willingly accepts the pain or injustice inflicted upon it by parents or rulers, and such a solution is not particularly satisfying to most readers.” (Hutter, Nation and Generation in A Tale of Two Cities)

What seems to be more intriguing is the fact that this divine metaphorical characterization is parallelized in the form of Lucie Manette who acts as a “golden thread” of hope and light for the surrounding characters including Dr. Manette, Carton, Darnay and even Miss Pross. Although one dimensional in the sense that Lucie never truly stands up for herself and remains weak and submissive with constant bouts of fainting, it is interesting that Lucie’s weakness inspires such a strong sense of heroic devotion and goodness from the other characters. Dr. Manette’s bond with his daughter truly enables him to fight for his son in law and become recalled to life from the horrors of prison life and obsessive shoemaking in the Bastille. On the other hand, Mr. Lorry’s devotion and good deeds for Lucy and Dr. Manette are arguably “motivated by service and duty rather than by self-interest. In this sense, as he has already told Carton, he is not his own man: " 'We men of business, who serve a House, are not our own masters. We have to think of the House more than ourselves'" (86). 'In a similar way I am, or I have been, trustee of one kind or other for scores of our customers.'" His most significant function in the novel is as a trustee, for his great trust was Lucie Manette, and she knows it: '"when I was left an orphan through my mother's surviving my father only two years, it was you who brought me to England'" (25-26). This rescue mission turns Lorry into a Prospero figure (he remembers holding a child in his arms "when the hail drifted heavily, and the sea ran high" [231).” (Petch, The Barrister)

Even Miss Pross turns into a hero while exhibiting protectiveness over Lucie when she fights with Madame Defarge: “I am a Briton. I am desperate. I don’t care an English Two pence for myself. I know that the longer I keep you here, the greater hope there is for my Lady Bird.” (Dickens,381) Miss Pross’s selflessness and heroic acts of courage gives rise to her status as a supporting character of indispensable worth and places her in direct contrast to the apparently villainous Madame Defarge whose focus and devotion is not for a ward but for a revolutionary ideal. Madame Defarge is certainly described by Ernest Defarge as a “great woman, a strong woman, a grand woman, a frightfully grand woman!"(Dickens,193) The use of the word ‘frightfully’ ties in very subtly with her rather dauntless if not bloodthirsty way of exacting revenge on the French aristocrats and the Evrémonde family that wronged her sister. In a way, Madame Defarge too is an iconic if not heroic character for the revolutionaries and stands to be rightfully admired for her patience and resilience in carrying out the revolution.

However, the dilemma of Madame Defarge stands to be that she carries out the courageous revolution for the satisfaction of her own bloodlust. Her actions are colored by vengeance and hatred. The characters of Carton, Darnay, the Manettes and even Miss Pross and Mr. Lorry are motivated by positive emotions like love, duty and responsibility. It is by the latter formula that the readers select the real heroes in *A Tale of Two Cities.*

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