

his own affiliation with the rising class of urban intelligentsia.” She maintains that “Dickens’s narrative choices in *A Tale of Two Cities* offers a representation of this new and increasingly prominent class during the novelist’s own lifetime.” Toker sees this theme as “another ‘golden thread’ that unites the present and the past by projecting later developments into the period when they were only beginning to sprout.”

Next, in a probing essay titled “Sydney Carton Goes to His Death: Five Visualizations of the Famous Ending of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*,” Jordan Bailey shows how the technique of “close reading” can be useful not only in examining a text itself but also in examining visual illustrations of a text. She observes that “probably the most memorable episode in *A Tale of Two Cities*—and probably one of the most famous episodes in all of English literature—occurs near the very end of the novel. This,” she explains, “is the episode in which Sydney Carton, in a supreme moment of true love and self-sacrifice, goes to his execution at the guillotine” so that Darnay, the husband of the woman Carton secretly loves, can escape that deadly fate. This episode, Bailey reports, “is one of the most-often illustrated scenes of the entire novel. Anyone trying to visualize Dickens’s book—whether in drawings or paintings or in films or on television—knows how significant this scene is and also how important it is to give the scene a memorable visual impact.” Her essay discusses five different “visualizations” of Carton on the way to his death—four printed illustrations and one particular shot from a famous early silent movie.

The picture taken from the silent film helps emphasize that by the first decades of the twentieth century, movies had become one of the most common ways to bring Dickens’s novels to visual life. In 1935, Hollywood released one of the most famous and most respected of all adaptations of his works—a big-budget production directed by Jack Conway and memorably starring Ronald Colman as Carton. McKenna Odom, in an essay titled “The 1935 Film of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*: A Survey of Reviews,” reports that all the assessments she summarizes suggest that the 1935 film “is widely considered an especially successful movie, particularly as

An article by Daniel Stout notes how the French Revolution, whether in *A Tale of Two Cities* or by itself, turns names to numbers. Commentators have seen how the novel stresses numbers; even the word “tale” derives from the idea of counting, adding up, telling numbers. Carton is no 23 when he is guillotined, the guillotine being the leveler; indeed, almost the state itself. When Sydney Carton asks the wood-sawyer: “How goes the Republic?” he is answered:

“You mean the Guillotine. Not ill. Sixty-three today. We shall mount to a hundred soon. Samson [Henri Sanson] and his men complain, sometimes, of being exhausted. . . . Such a Barber . . .”

“Go and see him when he has a good batch. Figure this to yourself, citizen; he shaved the sixty-three today, in less than two pipes!” (299)

Carton’s query evokes the chapter “Death” in Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, a chapter Dickens quotes directly from in relation to Mme Roland asking for pen and paper at the scaffold (see *FR* 3.5.2.339–340 and *Tale* 360). The implicit question in “Death” is answered: “*La Guillotine ne va pas mal*” [“the guillotine isn’t going badly”].

Stout argues that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* minimized the individual, making individual agency something on loan from the nation (32); further, he asserts the Revolutionary motto—“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death”—makes death “the result of a commitment to a world without individuals” (33; see also *FR* 3.5.2.338 and *Tale* 269). Death, then, is inscribed in practices that have already entirely eliminated the individual, subsuming him or her into identification with past members of his class (Stout 36). This de-humanizing associates with the cold machinic force of the guillotine, first used in 1792, which facilitates cold, almost abstract violence, as Hannah Arendt notes how implements are always essential for violence (3–4). Carlyle notes the guillotine’s “speed of going” as an “index of the general velocity of the Republic. The clanking of its huge axe, rising and falling there, in horrid

to be, lovingly accepted suitor and lawful husband, but role is never fully matched with desire, and lives and love are wasted.

As Philip Hepburn lies dying, he thinks back to a moment in his childhood, forever associated with the scent of cowslips, when he earnestly resolved to be a good man like those he had read of in the Bible:

And the scent of those flowers was in his nostrils now, as he lay a-dying—his life ended, his battles fought, his time for “being good” over and gone—the opportunity, once given in all eternity, past. (Gaskell 447)

There are no second chances in this novel: wrongdoing can never be retrieved, and actions are irreparable. Hepburn may save Kinraid’s life but this cannot repair the damage his deception has done, and his own and Sylvia’s lives are ruined, while the one woman who has truly loved him, his fellow-shopworker Hester, is left unwed to mourn him in secret. Even his self-sacrifice in saving his daughter from the sea, unlike Carton’s, is not honored by any enduring remembrance, for time erases all life and truth:

But the memory of man fades away. A few old people can still tell you the tradition of the man who dies in a cottage somewhere about this spot,—died of starvation while his wife lived in hard-hearted plenty not two good stone-throws away. This is the form into which popular feeling and ignorance of the real facts, have moulded the story. (Gaskell 450)

There is no sense here of the past shaping the present, of anything like Scott’s dialectical process of history whereby the conflicts of the past find resolution in some middle way that represents progress; or even like Carton’s final prophetic vision that looks beyond the cycle of violence involved in the French Revolution to a better world, even if the process by which that cycle is broken remains unspecified. In *Sylvia’s Lovers* the storms of European history beat destructively on

Still from the 1917 Frank Lloyd Film of *A Tale of Two Cities*



Illustration 4.

Still from 1917 silent motion picture starring William Farnum as both Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. 1917. Fox Film Corporation via Wikimedia. [Public domain.]

Illustration 4 is a still from the 1917 silent motion picture directed by Frank Lloyd and starring William Farnum as both Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. In this photo, and unlike in the illustrations already discussed, an executioner is present and is ready to carry out the sentence. However, given the long line of executions on the docket for that day, it is strange that there is only one executioner present, with no assistants to help. This Carton looks not just somber but sad, as though he is pained to see that his life has come to an end or perhaps as if he feels a pang of jealousy at the thought of his demise while Darnay continues to enjoy Lucie's affections. Those sentiments are justified given the circumstances, of course, but they do not fit the uplifting reverie with which Carton ends his life. Perhaps, however, Carton's look reflects a somber pride at

taste for characterless young women.” Adding that there were, “additionally, many minor performances of distinction,” Thompson ended by hoping that this new adaptation would encourage people to track down the book and read it.

Lee Winfrey, in a mixed-to-positive review in his nationally syndicated column, wrote that “considerable praise can be laid upon the four-hour, four-part PBS version.” He called it a visually “beautiful production,” although he thought that “the brilliance of the photography and the care taken with the casting are often undercut here by mistaken decisions made by the producers.” He disliked the fact that the novel’s famous opening lines were postponed until the third episode, and he thought that the producers had made an “[e]ven worse” decision by having Sydney Carton speak his famous last lines when he was no longer even visible on screen. “It’s a dumb choice,” Winfrey wrote, “probably made because the producers have tried to make this a love story concentrating on the Darnays.” He continued: “In the absence of a well-drawn and vivid Carton, and in the presence of this vain attempt to make Charles and Lucie look more interesting than a couple of wimps, this *Two Cities* is highlighted by a chillingly compelling performance by French actress Kathie Kriegel as Therese Defarge.” He asserted that “Kriegel dominates every scene in which she appears. She makes it possible to understand Madame Defarge and at the same time to wish that her kind may never grow fruitful and multiply in great numbers again.” Concluding with further praise, he argued that Dickens, thanks to “the great sweep of his narrative powers, got the revolution down on paper right,” and that this same “verisimilitude has been accurately transferred to the little screen.”

Positive Reviews

In a mostly positive syndicated review, the Hollywood-based Howard Rosenberg wrote of the 1989 production that there was

lots to like here. Adapted for TV by Arthur Hopcraft and directed by Philippe Monnier, “A Tale of Two Cities” is grandly staged and a nice way to spend an evening. The climactic last half hour in which

of another scholar) that the people are “capable of enlightenment and reason when not subjected to imposture or ground down by brutality” (178–79). Furthermore, the people “are given articulate speech” in Dickens and they “often tell their own stories,” in contrast to Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, in which they “make sounds and create a noise, [but] they do not speak” (180).

Dickens’s use of “cinematic ‘dissolves’” (Mee argues) is exemplified in the passage describing how in the summer of 1792 the Manette family becomes enmeshed in the events of the French Revolution: Dickens evokes the peaceful footsteps echoing in their home, only to have them “*dissolve* into the ranks of men marching under the red flag and *dissolve* again into an image of wild beasts under pressure from a past understood to act with the pressure of a terrible curse on the present” (181). Thus, the past is shown to seem a “kind of weight” upon the present. Even Sydney Carton’s prophecy at the novel’s conclusion implies that the Manette family will live under the weight of the past, for not only will they keep Carton’s memory alive but also Lucie’s boy named after Carton “must listen to the tale being told again and again” (181–82). Arguing that Dickens wrote the novel under a “strong sense that Britain was on the verge of its own revolution,” Mee concludes that his novel, far from being confined to an “autonomous ‘human-moral’ sphere,” sees the past as “only representable via dissolves and other ways of seeing” that implies its continued presentness (185–86).

2014: Ambiguity and Modernity

In a 2014 article, Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker examine the use of ambiguity in *A Tale of Two Cities* as a “test case” of Dickens’s modernity (209). Noting that the conference on “Dickens, Modernism, Modernity” (at which this paper was evidently presented) stated that modernity “foregrounds the power of words” and “the text’s capacity to create an autonomous world,” the authors propose to examine Dickens’s novel in order to delineate its use of ambiguity; they also intend to see “if ambiguity can really be taken as a sign of modernity” (209). They express disagreement with some critics’ views that find—in the mode of “Derridean

Great Expectations (in *All the Year Round*). 1860–61
Our Mutual Friend (in monthly parts). 1864–65
The Mystery of Edwin Drood (in monthly parts). 1870

Short Fiction

“A Dinner at Poplar Walk” (first published writing, in the *Monthly Magazine*, followed by nine others in the same journal). 1833
Sketches by Boz (two series, contains fiction and nonfiction). 1836

Nonfiction

First article under the signature of “Boz” (in *Monthly Magazine*). 1834
Contributions to various periodicals, including the *Evening Chronicle*, edited by George Hogarth, father of his future wife. 1835
Sketches by Boz (two series, contains fiction and nonfiction). 1836
Sunday under Three Heads. 1836
Pictures from Italy (originally appeared in *Daily News*, of which Dickens was the first editor, from January 21 to February 9). 1846
The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices (mixture of memory and fiction, co-written with Wilkie Collins, published in *Household Words*). 1857
The Uncommercial Traveller (first series in *All the Year Round*. Other papers under the same name were also contributed by him at later dates). 1860

Operas

Village Coquettes (opera). 1836
The Strange Gentleman (comic opera). 1837
Is She His Wife? or Something Singular (comic burletta). 1837

Edited Collections

The Pic-Nic Papers [sic]. 1841
Household Words (magazine, publication began March 30, ended 1859). 1849
All the Year Round (magazine). 1859