

Social Criticism in *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens: From the Perspective of Genetic Structuralism

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Abstract—Social criticism is the analysis and evaluation of societal structures, norms, and practices to identify and challenge injustices, inequalities, and oppressive systems. Therefore, this study aims to determine social issues transformed into social criticism in the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. The process was based on the collection of data from the novel through the application of a qualitative descriptive method in order to analyze the themes, characters, and text. Social issues were also analyzed from two aspects, which included social condition in the novel and the subsequent impact, through the theory of genetic structuralism proposed by Lucien Goldman. The results showed that the condition and social issues were vividly presented through the theme, character, and text of the novel. This was observed from the illustration of extreme wealth and poverty as well as the cycle of violence that ensued from unchecked inequality which made the novel a powerful reflection on the need for empathy, social reform, and justice. Moreover, Dickens used the novel to invite readers to consider the long-lasting effects of social structures and how societal change could lead to destruction and redemption through the vivid portrayal of the tumultuous political landscape.

Index Terms—social, criticism, issues

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a concept that covers a wide range of written creations distinguished by literary style or expression and designed to offer aesthetic enjoyment instead of fulfilling a practical function. It consists of a diverse array of genres, including poetry, drama, fiction, and non-fiction, which are characterized by the objectives of the authors and the artistic quality of the presentation. According to Arafah et al. (2021), literary works often act as mirrors that reflect the reality of a given age. The works are a reflection of real life as well as a manifestation of the vision and experience associated with the authors during certain periods, specifically in the past (Afiah et al., 2022; Yudith et al., 2024). Moreover, literature is a broad category of written works that are considered significant due to the literary form or expression that aims to provide aesthetic pleasure rather than serve a utilitarian purpose (Arafah et al., 2025). It is an act that relies on the usage of

figurative language as media to present ideas aesthetically (Baa et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2024; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a). Each author has a unique style often used to attract readers' interest to the literary works produced (Asriyanti et al., 2022).

The information presented by Wellek and Warren (1956) described literature as a social institution that used language as the medium to present the ideas of the author and reflect social behavior phenomena. Authors often explore the phenomenon to be written about in order to understand the surrounding elements. This shows that literature provides useful information using the most appropriate styles such as short stories, poems, novels, plays, and songs (Arafah, 2018). For example, humans are presently modifying different habitation forms due to excessive needs (Jaelani et al., 2024). Literary works have presented information on the close relationship between humans and nature through different stories related to the environmental situation (Siwi et al., 2022; JUSDALYANA et al., 2024; Manugeran et al., 2023). This is possible because authors are mostly inspired by the surrounding environment, thereby showing the importance of the atmosphere in creating a literary masterpiece. The trend shows that authors often show their experiences, life situations, and the condition of the environment during the process of writing novels.

Wellek and Warren (1956, p. 95) showed that the phrase "Literature is an expression of society" was typically used to start discussions on the relationship between literature and society. This was based on the belief that literature could show the happenings in society and the typical features of the characters (Arafah et al., 2024). The trend leads to the belief that literary works serve a societal purpose in the context of social reality (Arafah et al., 2023). The inference is that authors talk about their feelings, imagination, experience, and thoughts. Therefore, literature can be generally explained as a written piece of art produced by a certain author (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019). Literary works are also defined as the personal opinion of authors about a concept that is subsequently passed to the public (Mutmainnah et al., 2022).

Literature is believed to be a form of human expression but not all concepts expressed in words, organized, and written down are classified under this category. For example, writings that are primarily informative, technical, scholarly, and journalistic are often excluded from the rank of literature by most, though not all, critics. However, certain forms of writing in literature are universally regarded as an art. Another important point is that literary works are perceived as a form of reflection of human life but not all reveal facts or truths. The readers are required to understand that these works are the product of the imagination of the authors and their reality is not consistently true (Sunyoto et al., 2022). Another study also explained literature as the mirror or reflection of society (Marliana et al., 2018).

Literary works and human lives are difficult to be separated. This is because literary works discuss life through the inspiration of the authors and are divided into three parts, including poetry, prose, and drama. The three aspects are considered products and parts of society. Moreover, the assumption that literature mirrors the current social situation 'correctly' at a specific period is false. The common and popular trend that the concept expresses life is even more ambiguous. This is because authors inevitably express their experience and total conception of life which do not reflect the complete and exhaustive account of the specific period (Wellek & Warren, 1956, p. 20).

Some literary works discuss social issues related to topics such as gender inequality, socioeconomic class, and intercultural conflict (Yudith et al., 2024; Arafah, 2011). English authors have frequently discussed the impact of these social issues on the lives of people and society through intricate plots and compelling characters. This is based on the consideration that literary works can change the mindset of people about social conditions (Lestari et al., 2025). Moreover, Wellek and Warren (1956) explained literature as a social institution used by authors to reflect their thoughts on social behavior through the application of language as the medium. The trend led to the identification of language as a tool to present cultural meaning and values (Yudith et al., 2023). It works as a communication medium to deliver the message and ensure the information required is passed across from the authors to the readers (Asri et al., 2023; Yulianti et al., 2022). Social issues are certainly expressed explicitly and implicitly in the works to inform or entertain readers and provide education on values or good behaviors (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). The purpose is to ensure readers gain value through the story in addition to self-awareness to be more positive human beings (Arifuddin et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2020; Fadillah et al., 2022; Iksora et al., 2022).

Cultural values and literary works are inseparable because authors use literary works to present the values contained in society as well as the actions and behaviors of each member (Arafah et al., 2023; Takwa et al., 2022). Traditions and local languages can also be captured because both are parts of local wealth with significant valuable contents (Takwa et al., 2024; Mofu et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2020). However, the change to the digital age tends to modernize traditional values (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b; Suhadi et al., 2022; Takwa et al., 2022). This is critical because the change of values can influence the character of the younger generation, specifically Generation Z which spends more time on social media rather than communicating with the surrounding environment (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022; Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b). The trend has increased the call for attention to the situation with some people observed to be valuing local traditions more due to the pressure (Arifin et al., 2022). Therefore, optimism is expected to be used in solving the problems associated with the fear of losing valuable heritage (Arafah et al., 2024). This is possible because the culture presented in literary works as a form of art can be passed down for generations to avoid abandonment (Takwa et al., 2024; Kaharuddin et al., 2017).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Genetic structuralism is a basic component derived from both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of literary works. The concept is explained as the arrangement of words to form a suitable pattern of sentence. This is necessary because the

mastery of sentence structure is considered to be more than the acquisition of vocabulary. Moreover, genetic structuralism is based on the theory of behaviorism and the application of the method to teach language requires understanding the pattern and structure. This is considered important because every language differs structurally.

Human behavior has a coherent structure which is a response to social support and the natural environment (Goldmann, 1981, p. 15). This is observed from the fact that human sciences have two essential categories, including structure and function. The aspect of function enables a person to improve on balance and is considered not inherently conscious to eliminate the fundamental bias of the conventional human sciences (Goldman & Boelhower, 1980).

Lucien Goldmann developed genetic structuralism as a method for analyzing literary works. The theory was divided into two large frameworks and the first was the relationship between the meanings of an element in the same literary work while the second focused on when the correlation became mutually binding. This shows that authors can influence a worldview that is not a fact but a depiction of their imagination (Endraswara, 2003, p. 56). The trend explains genetic structuralism as a branch of literary sociology that connects the structure of literary works, the social context of society, and the worldview of authors (Yasa, 2012). The method shows that there is a dialectical relationship between literary works and social structure.

Genetic structuralism was established on several fundamental ideas to understand the basic information that could be used to develop other important concepts. The emergence as part of the 20th-century critical methods cannot be separated from the development of different literary theories at the very beginning of the century. For example, the sociology of literature which focused on the relationship between literary works, and other external factors including the authors, society, and historical background as well as structuralism emphasized the autonomy and differences between these factors. However, the development of genetic structuralism served as a link between the factors. It was initiated through the idea of human fact which was synonymous with human conduct. According to Faruk (2014, p. 156), human facts were all actions and behaviors, verbal and physical, that humans engaged in and sciences attempted to comprehend. Furthermore, genetic structuralism requires philosophy to understand literary work because the worldview is considered as the concept to provide an alternative structure to society (Azi, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative method to analyze social criticism in *A Tale of Two Cities* as observed in the precise data described specifically based on the information retrieved from the novel. According to Mack et al. (2005, p. 1), qualitative studies could be effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations.

The supporting data used were the information, evidence, or details that reinforced, substantiated, or validated the claim, argument, or conclusion. The data were considered important in various contexts, such as research and analysis (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Arafah et al., 2020). The focus covered any relevant information and additional sources such as books, theses, journal articles, and online materials that supported a statement or argument to provide a solid foundation for conclusions or analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Tale of Two Cities describes social problems identified and criticized by Charles Dickens. These are further discussed and presented as follows.

A. *The Portrayal of Social Conditions in the Novel*

The social life of the time was portrayed in a highly critical and complex way, reflecting the stark contrasts between the privileged aristocracy and the suffering lower classes during the French Revolution. Social conditions are a central theme of the novel and Dickens uses the characters, events, and settings to show the inequalities, injustices, and turbulence of the period. The novel shows extreme and rampant inequality, systemic injustice, and class division which lead to both personal and societal unrest. Moreover, the stark contrasts between the lives of the privileged and the oppressed, as well as the violent consequences of revolutionary ideals, serve as a powerful critique of social systems at the time.

(a). *Social Class*

A Tale of Two Cities presents social class as a prominent theme that reflects the stark divisions between the aristocracy and the lower classes, particularly in the context of the period before and during Revolutionary France. This was observed in several passages such as the very first paragraph where Dickens contrasted the extremes of social conditions, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... 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, 2012, p. 1). This opening quote sets the stage for a society deeply divided by social class, where extreme wealth and poverty coexist.

(b). *The Injustice in the Legal System*

Charles Dickens presents the injustice in the legal system through the novel, specifically in the context of the French Revolution. The character, Dr. Manette, and the oppressive legal system in both France and England were used to critique the manipulation and abuse of laws which often led to unfair treatment and suffering. An example of the most poignant depictions of the injustice occurred during the trial of Charles Darnay which was more about public spectacle than justice even though the character was innocent of the charges. The trial was characterized by political maneuvering with the legal process subverted to serve the needs of the revolutionaries. This was observed from the extract "The courtroom was full, and the judges sat there, with their wigs and their frowns, listening to all that was said as if they were hearing it for the first time. They were like pieces of iron that had been cast into their seats for no other purpose than to judge those that were brought before them" (Dickens, 2012, p. 340). The statement showed that the judicial system was mechanical and indifferent, leading to failure to ensure impartiality or the delivery of justice based on the merits of the case.

B. *The Portrayal of the Impacts of Social Issues in the Novel*

Social impacts were portrayed as a multifaceted exploration of inequality, revolution, sacrifice, and personal transformation. Dickens critiqued the rigidity of class systems, the dangers of unchecked vengeance, and the possibility of redemption through personal action. The novel serves as both a cautionary tale about the consequences of social injustice and a hopeful reflection on how individuals can rise above circumstances to make a meaningful difference. Moreover, the intersection between social issues, personal choice, and historical events ensures *A Tale of Two Cities* powerfully reflects the broader social impact of revolutionary change.

(a). *The Abuse of Power and Corruption*

Several passages show the themes related to abuse of power and corruption in the novel. This is because the concepts are central to the narrative as observed in both the French aristocracy and the revolutionary forces showing how power can corrupt and lead to brutal outcomes. An example of the most striking occurrence was the character of Madame Defarge who embodied the vengeance and ruthlessness associated with giving power to the wrong people. This was observed from specific passages such as "The time will come, when the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the despondent, will rise in their might, and make a last stand for their rights. They will break the chains that bind them, and trample the oppressors beneath their feet" (Dickens, 2012, p. 307). The statement reflects the growing resentment of the lower classes against the abuse of power by the aristocrats, leading to the eventual revolt. However, the relentless drive of Madame Defarge for revenge shows the possibility of the abused becoming equally corrupt when in power. This was observed from the fact that the character did not show mercy to even those who could be innocent of the crimes projected to have been committed.

Another quote that speaks to the corrupting influence of power is identified in the actions of the Marquis St. Evrémonte character. The cruelty of the character toward the lower classes was part of the clearest depictions of aristocratic corruption. "I have been accustomed to this", said the Marquis, as he looked at the murdered child and I will not stop for such a trifle" (Dickens, 2012, p. 105). This statement shows the complete indifference of the Marquis to human life, reflecting how the aristocracy, in its unchecked power, becomes desensitized to suffering and cruelty. The abuse of power leads the character to act with a brutal sense of entitlement without any compassion or remorse.

(b). *The Revolution and Social Retribution*

The themes of revolution and social retribution are central to the narrative of the novel and its examination of the socio-political upheaval during the French Revolution. This was observed in the experiences of the main characters, their struggles, and the larger societal forces at play.

As the revolution erupted, the lower class wanted revenge on the aristocracy. A key character in the novel, Madame Defarge, embodied the darker side of the revolution as observed in the relentless pursuit of vengeance against the aristocracy which symbolized the danger of revenge without a sense of proportionality or forgiveness. The vendetta against the Evrémonte family and the determination of Madame Defarge to ensure their destruction showed that the thirst for retribution could lead to a cycle of violence and dehumanization. The character served as the symbol of revolutionary zeal as well as the desire for justice and retribution. This was confirmed by the statement "I am the wife of a poor man, and I have been married to him for five-and-twenty years. In that time, my father has made me his slave. I have suffered, and I have learned that revenge is sweeter than forgiveness" (Dickens, 2012, p. 46).

The quest of Madame Defarge for vengeance showed the anger that simmered for years under oppressive aristocratic rule, where the poor were neglected, abused, and left to suffer. The role of the character showed how social issues and injustices led to a thirst for retribution and the process through which the revolution became a force of social upheaval.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *A Tale of Two Cities* portrayed some social criticisms identified through class disparity, injustice, and the corrupting effects of power served as a backdrop to the story and significantly shaped the actions and destinies of the characters. The process of analyzing the personal tales of Dr. Manette, Charles Darnay, Sydney Carton, and Madame Defarge allowed Dickens to examine the effects of social turmoil as well as the intricate relationships between personal

choices and societal influences. The novel showed the need to implement social change with empathy despite its importance because uncontrolled rage and revenge could sustain the problems the process was designed to address.

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