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November 1, 2013

AP Humanities

Passage Analysis Essay Test: “A Tale of Two Cities”

Charles Dickens’ novel: “A Tale of Two Cities” takes place in the corrupt times of the French Revolution. This specific passage describes in thorough detail Mr. Lorry’s observations and shocked reaction to what he sees from Tellson’s Bank. Dickens expresses how bloodthirsty for revenge the revolutionaries have become during the Revolution by using strong images, distinct dialog, and selective symbolism.

The Revolution throws the peasants into stages of rage and insanity. In this scene they appear to be madly working at the grindstone below Tellson’s Bank. Dickens describes them as “frantic wielders”, displaying images of men stripped to the waist, shouldering one another to get next at the sharpening stone. “But, such awful workers, and such awful work!” writes Dickens. He expresses the frenzy of the scene, using strong language and many levels of imagery. “False eyebrows and false mustaches were stuck upon them, and their hideous countenances were all bloody and sweaty, and all awry with howling, and all staring and glaring with beastly excitement and want of sleep.” The complex images used in this scene bring out the rage and anxiety of the peasants. Their crazy desire to kill merely out of revenge is overwhelming. Dickens even uses images of the patriots wearing the clothes of the people they have killed to display as trophies of their victory. “Men devilishly set off with spoils of women’s lace and silk and ribbon, with the stain dyeing those trifles through and through.” The people bring loads of weapons to the grindstone all to be sharpened. But the weapons are all still dripping with the blood of the people that were just killed. “Hatchets, knives, bayonets, swords, all brought to be sharpened, were all red with it.” Dickens describes the emotion, the physical appearance, and barbaric actions of the peasants with much intensity, comparing them to beasts who lack all human compassion.

Dickens uses mainly short and limited dialog between Mr. Lorry, Dr. Manette, Miss Pross, and Lucie to add to the suspense of the scene. The condensed dialog brings out the emotion of the characters that are observing the action of the patriots by the grindstone. The characters are overcome with shock and fear as they watch the horrific scene below. The dialog always ends in exclamation to draw out their panic and discomposure. Mr. Lorry is shown with much distress and worry as he hastily runs around the bank. “He closed the lattice again with a fluttering heart, closed the window and the curtain…” When Dr. Manette flings himself into the angry mob of patriots, it certainly does not improve the nerves of Mr. Lorry. The way that Dr. Manette throws himself into the crowd because he is certain he can help Charles Darnay displays the compassion that the revolutionaries lack. And through Dr. Manette gallant efforts, he causes the peasants to rally behind him. “And then Mr. Lorry saw him, surrounded by all, and in the midst of a line of twenty men long, all linked shoulder to shoulder, hurried out with cries of—“Live the Bastille prisoner! Help for the Bastille prisoner’s kindred in La Force! Room for the Bastille prisoner in front there! Save the prisoner Evremonde at La Force!” and a thousand answering shouts.” The courageous act of Dr. Manette in this scene stands out above all the other scenes of blood and gore and violence that the patriots have carelessly brought about.

The literary element of symbolism is also profoundly used in this passage. For example, the ending of the context, Dickens thoughtfully describes “The great grindstone, Earth”. Dickens refers to Earth as the great grindstone because Earth turns, bringing constant changes and birthing new civilizations and new ages. Both can bring death to those innocent of any crime or to those who are justly accused. The grindstone symbolizing Earth brings strong images of how, just like a grindstone, Earth turns, bringing death upon the good and upon the bad, no matter the circumstances. This symbolic reference ends the chaotic scene appropriately, for it reflects the introduction of a new advancement. “Mr. Lorry looked out again, and the sun was red on the court-yard. But, the lesser grindstone stood alone there in the calm morning air, with a red upon it that the sun had never given, and would never take away”. This passage is symbolic for death and how death is a sudden event that will never be forewarned or taken away. The image of “red on the court-yard” is symbolic for blood spilt before death. This comparison foreshadows more revolutionary acts that will cause even more devastating deaths in the future.

The Revolution brings death, and the revolutionaries crave it. The revolutionaries are completely corrupted by the unjust events that played out before, that they now have become barbaric and hunger for the revenge toward the aristocrats. The Revolution rolls in, and the patriots attack with overwhelming brutality. In this passage, Dickens describes the horrific events that play out in unfathomable measures. “…the same red hue was red in their frenzied eyes…”