



## Defamiliarization and the Delayed Perception: A Study in the Art of “A Tale of Two Cities”

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to highlight the art of A Tale of Two Cities in the light of defamiliarization and the delayed perception as proposed by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay, “Art as Device”. While reading the text of A Tale of Two Cities, it becomes noticeable that Dickens drags the earlier part of the narrative intentionally. He invests ambiguity in the story, switching from France to England, bringing estrangement in the character sketches, while twinning the personas of Darney and Carton and constructs ambiguity with the help of language used in the text. The prolonged depiction of the story, the delayed portrayal of the characters and the ambiguity of the language, all correspond to the device of defamiliarization and delayed perception. This article enquires as to how and why Dickens uses such devices to communicate his message. Hence the research is descriptive and explanatory in nature. The aforementioned devices used by the author have been studied through Close reading method. The selected passages have been read meticulously in the light of Russian Formalistic Approach to discuss the issue.*

**Keywords:** Defamiliarization, Delayed, Perception, Art, A Tale of Two Cities.

### Introduction

Narratives communicate. Complex narratives communicate something complicated. *A Tale of Two Cities* is one such example. Set in England and France *A Tale of Two Cities* is an historical-political novel written by Charles Dickens, thematizing the French Revolution and its profound effects on the lives of its characters. Through the characters of Charles Darney, Sydney Carton, Dr. Menette and his daughter, Miss Menette and the Defarges, Dickens invests his narrative with an uncommon experience of life. The trials and tribulations of the characters during the French Revolution are of epic experience. However, Dickens' narrative style or the use of stylistics in *A Tale of Two Cities* is quite complex. The use of complex language, the use of complex literary devices and the investment of the duality of characters is a unique experience for a Dickensian reader. The text, because of this ambiguity and complexity takes toll on the reader's reading time and mental energy. The reader actually feels a brain fog as the text of the narrative itself communicates through its misty language, characters and situation.

Therefore, the purpose of this research work is to highlight the use of complexly woven literary devices, defamiliarized characters and misty narrative by Dickens to communicate the complexity of French Revolution. While reading Dickens' masterpieces, such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* and switching towards the reading of *A Tale of Two Cities*, one experiences a stylistic change in its narrative. Like an artist he defamiliarizes the narrative, inviting his reader to something uncommon and unfamiliar. What strikes this work's importance is the use of Text-Oriented approach, i.e. with the help of language, the choice of characters as symbols of duality and the structure of narrative, Dickens communicates about the atrocities of the era. The tensions and the contradictions within the text, the surprises and the ambiguity all are the

devices used by him. Hence, the following research objectives mark this research work.

### Research Objectives

The objectives of this research work are as under:

- To conduct linguistic analysis of the text in the light of defamiliarization.
- To highlight the use of defamiliarization and delayed perception through the duality of characters such as Charles Darney and Sydney Carton.
- To highlight the use of this device through the construction of the narrative.

### Research Questions

Keeping the aforementioned research objectives, following research questions mark this study:

- How does the language of the text create the effect of defamiliarization?
- Why do the characters of Charles Darney and Sydney Carton, Menettes etc. serve to fulfill the purpose of defamiliarization in the text?
- Why does the narrative of *A Tale of Two Cities* employ the devices of defamiliarization and delayed perception?

### Literature Review

Kucich (1980) depicts *A Tale of Two Cities* in the light of its narrative mode. According to him, its neither Sydney's Christ like martyrdom nor in its offering of psychological complexities, that capture the attention of the reader, it is its style that is most captivating and thought-provoking. Underrated, the novel requires rereading of its complexities.

Griffiths (2013) observes the text in the light of duplicity of cities, England and Paris, duplicity of characters such as of Charles Darney and Sydney Carton. The motif of doubling is recurring throughout the text. The title of the novel is itself suggestive, a touch of Anglo-French comparative study of the two countries. The earlier few pages of the novel strike comparison of the two cities in relation to the chaos. However, the most striking feature of the novel is doubling which further needs inquiry. Griffiths (2013) comments on the art of *A Tale of Two Cities* as abundant in doubling; doubling of plot, doubling of characters, such as Darney and Carton and doubling of the two cities, and the scenic similarities between France and England.

Gallagher (1983) reads Victorian novelists, such as Eliot, Thackeray, and Dickens in their use of technique. She observed them as self-reflective as any other Victorian novel. The primary technique of the Victorian self-reflectiveness is the insertion of analogues into the narratives. The narrative analogue of *A Tale of Two Cities* doubling which instead conceals than reveals. The narrative, while employing the techniques of doubling such as the doubling of the cities, doubling of the characters focuses of concealment than on some revelation.

While observing surveillance in *A Tale of Two Cities* in the form of Madame Defarge's registering of people and sending them to guillotine, Tarr (2021) views Dickens' concern for people's liberty and freedom. This curtailment in the form of government's watchfulness of people's movement, their freedom, sets *A Tale of Two Cities* as a voice against oppression. While referring to Foucault's statement, “Surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration” in *Discipline and Punishment*, Tarr has noted the relevance of *A Tale of Two Cities* to our contemporary world (Tarr, 2021, p. 641).

David (2010) while studying the historicity of *A Tale of Two Cities*, observes that although the text has captured its

attention on its of quoted lines, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' and recalling Sydney Carton's last moments of sacrifice, the novel remains to be studied through the lens of history. Thomas Carlyle's book on the history of French Revolution. The writer observes its under-ratedness as compared to Dickens' other works such as *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*. However, deeply imbedded in the text is the history of French Revolution and its impact on the lives of its characters.

Yoo (2021) enquires the duality of *A Tale* in the hybrid identity of John Solomon or Solomon John as asked by Jerry of an individual's identity in the novel. This, according to Yoo, is throughout deployed by Dickens in his narrative. John Barsad and Solomon Pross, Ms Pross' lost brother who both assumes dual identities in the text. This study explains Dickens' use of unconventional method of characterization, the method of taking an individual and glossing with the characteristics of another individual.

Sorensen (2013) examines *A Tale of Two Cities* in connection to the Revolution. The story of the novel heavily dwells upon the information written by Carlyle in *The French Revolution*. The history book inspire Dickens to work on this historical fiction.

### Methodology

The research work is qualitative in nature, seeking the what and how questions. As the study engages in depicting the defamiliarization and seeking as to why this device is being employed therefore, it both descriptive and explanatory research. The study employs text-oriented approach proposed by Viktor Shklovsky as depicted in 'Art as Device'. The text of *A Tale of Two Cities* has been studied by Close Reading and Textual Analysis methods. The use of various formalistic devices, then have been analysed in the light of Russian Formalists who claim that literature is to be understood through its forms and structures and language. The study is descriptive as well as explanatory as it points out the passages through which the author has employed the formalist devices to communicate the complexity of the French Revolution along with the questions of how and why, the study relates to the uses of formalistic devices. Conducting a brief comparative analysis of the text employed in *A Tale of Two Cities* with *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, and highlighting the differences in their art, the study also employs a comparative analysis of the text.

### Analysis and Discussion

Shklovsky in his phenomenal essay 'Art as Device' breaks away from the historical and biographical approaches to study literature. He argues that instead of relying on the biography and historical period of an author, one must approach literature through its form, structure and language. Russian Formalism as a theoretical approach emerged around 1917 proposing studying literature through the study of linguistics. The Formalists argue that, as literature is expressed in a language, therefore, language can serve as a tool to decode the hidden meaning of a literary text, hence expanding the scope of linguistics. They also establish their authority on decoding the literary texts with the help of language. The proponents of language-oriented approaches consider literature as belonging to the domain of linguistics and they claim that literature is to be studied through the lens of linguistics.

The Formalists claim that the purpose of art is to make things strange, 'ostraneie' so that we as a reader notice them more attentively. The function of art is to make things literary and artistic by changing our habitual perceptions to something fresh and newer. As Shklovsky observed in 'Art As Device' in the following way:

"Art is thinking in images." This maxim, which even high school students parrot, is nevertheless the starting point for the erudite philologist who is beginning to put together some kind of systematic literary theory. (Shklovsky, 1965, p.6)

The more the delayed perception, the more the literary and aesthetic, a piece of art is. Therefore, Formalists' theories of narrative also dwell upon the plot rather on story. The story or the 'fabula' according to the Formalists is a raw material, on which a plot 'sjuzet' is constructed through an organizing hand of an artist. The plot of *Tristram Shandy* is especially liked by Shklovsky because of its delayed narration and the use of all the devices that frustrate the reader for the literariness of the plot itself. That is why Formalists link theory of the plot with the theory of defamiliarization. It is the plot that prevents us with familiar and typical. We as a reader are made to believe how the artifice constructs and forges the reality presented before us (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 1997).

While studying *A Tale of Two Cities* through the lens, one immediately captures the extensive use of literary devices employed by Charles Dickens. The very first few pages of the narrative strike the features of ambiguity, defamiliarization and the delayed perception. The text is mystified intentionally by the author. The hidden meaning, the complexity of the era of French Revolution and its effects on France and England can be decoded with the help of the linguistic devices suggested by Formalist approach. Following is a detailed account of defamiliarization and delayed perception in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

### Ambiguity in the use of Language

A very prominent feature of the text is ambiguity which strikes the narrative of *A Tale* by the extensive use of literary devices, such as antithesis, repetitions and alliteration. The reader is immersed in the spell-bound environment as soon as he first encounters the text. The example of antithesis follows:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, 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. (Dickens, 1975, p. 1)

The use of antithesis creates the sense of defamiliarization, e.g., creating a sense of uncommonness, unusualness or mystification; how the times could be both worst and best, or wise and unwise, of hope and despair, and of having everything and nothing at hand. The use of such device by Charles Dickens intentionally makes the setting unfamiliar because relating the events before and during the French Revolution, Dickens makes sets the plot grounded firmly on uncertainties as depicted in the era. The Revolution was a significant event which brought great social and political upheavals, leading to the dismantling of the Monarchy and the establishment of the First French Republic, killing King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette. The rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the shaking of centuries old intuitions by the middle class changed the course of the European history completely. The Revolution was inspired by the Enlightenment, promoting the slogan of liberty, equality and fraternity. By drawing upon the history, he intends to invest the ambiguity in the narrative because the time of the Revolution itself is uncertain. People, both of England and France had suffered badly before and after the Revolution. As the narrative further reveals the setting.

The monarchy, both at England and France is ruthless and violent. That is why the narrator mimics the faces of the Kings and the Queens. And the ruthlessness and violence are expressed in terms of one thousand seven hundred and seventy five, a hyperbole, for creating the effect. Basically Dickens intends to create the environment of uncertainty. The contrast of the rich and the poor is also obvious.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France ...These things and thousands like them, came to pass in and close upon the dear old year one



thousand seven hundred and seventy five. Environed by them, while the Woodman and the Farmer worked unheeded, those two of the large jaws, and those two of the plain and fair faces, trod with stir enough, and carried their divine rights with a high hand. Thus did the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy five conduct their Greatness, and myriads of small creatures- the creatures of this chronicle among the rest-along the roads that lay before them. (p.1-2)

The narrative depicts the time before the French Revolution, however, indicating the complexity through the use of naïve language, 'the dear old year one thousand seven hundred and seventy five'. Simply writing the year as 1775, Dickens defamiliarizes the situation only to bring the reader to the heightened sense of awareness. This technique makes the reader attentive to the pain, the people had suffered during the era. The history or the 'Chronicle' (p.3) of small creatures, of all the characters who became the victims of their circumstances refers to the making of this event. The texts reads as such:

It was the Dover road that lay, on a Friday night late in November, before the first of the persons with whom this history has business. The Dover road lay, as to him, beyond the Dover mail, as it lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He walked up-hill in the mire by the side of the mail, as the rest of the passengers did; because the hill, and the harness, and the mud, and the mail, were all so heavy, that the horses had three times already come to a stop. (p.3)

The language of the text seems dragging with repetitions such as Dover road, Dover mail, alliteration such as mire by the side of the mud, hill and the harness, mud and the mail, heavy and the horses.

'Keep where you are,' the guard called to the voice in the mist, 'because if I should make a mistake, it could never be set right in your lifetime...The figures of the horse and rider came slowly through the eddying mist, and came to the side of the mail, where the passenger stood. (p.5)

With the help of the language the text indicates the mystery and mystification of the circumstances surrounding the narrative of the text. Gradually as the mail and horse push their way forward the narrative moves forward. So the setting of the environment, the mist surround the mail itself communicates something very misty in the story. Likewise, Dickens use of Parallelism also constructs the similarity of the two cities, France and England. France is roaring with French Revolution and probability is that England follow the same course of action.

However, if we compare the art of *A Tale* with the art of *Great Expectations*, the difference of the language stands obvious:

The text of *Great Expectation* starts as such:

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip. I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister, - Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. (Dickens, 2021, p.3)

The language is simple. Literary devices are not employed. There is no unnecessary dragging of the narrative, and it is told in the simplest First person narrative. The language helps to indicate something of a boy named Pip who reflects upon his childhood and his adolescence. Completely different from the narrative of *A Tale of two Cities*, the simplicity of language communicates something simple, a becoming-of age narrative which sailed smoothly. The focalization is the First person, which means that the friendly narrator recounts the story through his personal perspective. Likewise, the

perceptions founded after reading the narrative of *David Copperfield*, too, seem easy perception, which refers to the ability of readily and accurately perceiving the thing; the reader is less likely to fall because of perceptual illusion. In

the very first chapter, 'I am Born', David gives an account of his birth in these words:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my life, or whether this station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday at twelve o'clock at night. I was remarked that the clock began to strike and I began to cry simultaneously. (Dickens, p.13)

The language again indicates the reflections of childhood and adolescence of the protagonist. However, after reading the two texts and turning towards the reading of *A Tale of Two Cities*, one feels striking contrast in the employment of the resource of language. The very first few words, of the text, 'It was the best times, it was the worst times' invite intensive attention on the part of the reader and going with the track of the narrative seem consuming. However, with the help of the lens of Formalism, one can penetrate into the narrative and parse the devices used, such as the employment of antithesis and parallelism, which, of course, helps indicate the complexity of the events. Through the devices mentioned above, and various other devices, one can conclude the employment of such kind of language drives the reader to the very uncommon, unusual events, i.e. the making of the French Revolution and its consequential effects on the characters of *A Tale*.

#### **Ambiguity in the Characters**

One of the most striking features of the narrative is its duality of characters. Ambiguity in the characters are featured by Dickens in the doubling of Charles Darney and Sydney Carton and the doubling of Miss Minette and her mother. This characteristic also serves the purpose of defamiliarization. The purpose of this physical similarity between these two characters is revealed at the very close of the drama when Darney, miraculously is released from the tragedy and Sydney gets his place. However, what is relevant to the defamiliarization is that each character is set in doubling or parallelism. Through this technique the writer infuses the internal, revolutionary struggle of each character during the testing times of the Revolution. The duality symbolizes the common struggle of the characters. Charles Darney, while facing his trial in the court is described as such:

The object of all this staring and blaring was a young man of about five and twenty, well grown and well looking, with a sunburnt cheek and a dark eye. He was plainly dressed in black, or very dark grey, and his hair, which was long and dark, was gathered in a ribbon at the back of his neck...he was otherwise quite self possessed, bowed to the Judge and stood quiet. (p.52)

The counter part of Charles Darney is Sydney Carton who is described as such:

Mr. Carton, who had so long sat looking at the ceiling of the court, changed neither his place nor his attitude, even in this excitement. He sat leaning back, with his torn gown half off him, his untidy wig put on just as it had happened to light on his head after its removal, his hand in his pockets, his eyes on the ceiling as they had been all day. Something especially reckless in his demeanour, not only gave him a disreputable look, but so diminished the strong resemblance he undoubtedly bore to the prisoner that many of the lookers-on, taking note of him now, said to one another they would hardly have thought the two were so alike. (p. 67)

What relates their duality is their close friendship, their common love, Lucie, which ultimately ends at the sacrifice of Sydney Carton. The two friends are not related however, they are bound spiritually. Their love for Lucie binds them. Carton wasted his life, viewed himself as unworthy of love and redeemed his purposeless life by his sacrifice, a final act of love and redemption, 'It is far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done, it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known (p.371).

#### **Ambiguity in the Structure of the Narrative**

The ambiguity of the narrative is also evident from the text. The plot, first and foremost, progresses very slowly, the setting of the very first scene in the first chapter 'Recalled to Life' is mystifying. The reader has to struggle with the earlier part of story, a messenger who is in search of a person in Dover mail. Only through invested energy can one decode the story.

As Barry (2002) puts it, the narrative do not simply narrate in a linear order. Instead they use flash backs and flash forward to, employing the techniques of analeptic and proleptic, respectively. This is what is the main difference between a story and a plot. A story starts with a linear order of things and time and proceeds further without leaving any detail, however plot may begin in the middle, switching back and forth. Such as technique has been used in *A Tale of Two Cities* when Dickens uses and anticipating moment of the Revolution by referring to the spilling of the wine, predicting the horrific bloodshed of the Revolution. The purpose of such a narrative technique is to gear up the reader for the necessary narrative momentum (Barry, 2002).

The texts reads as such:

A large cask of wine had been dropped and broken, in the street. The cask had tumbled out with a run, the hoops had burst, and it lay on the stones just outside the door of the wine-shop, shattered like a walnut-shell...the wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. (pp.21-22)

What relates this discussion of narratology with the narrative structure of *A Tale* is that Dickens uses such a formalistic device to bring something unusual. While starting his narrative from the year 1775 and jumping well ahead to the five years later, 1780, he compresses various events in a single time-lapse. The style, the view-point, the pace and the whole packaging of the narratives that creates an overall meaning to the narrative. What can be interpreted is the fact that *A Tale* is more a structured story, a plot, or a narrative, in technical term that creates meaning of the French Revolution. Therefore, while relying on the Russian Formalists' theory of forms and structures of a narrative, such as proposed by Propp in *The Morphology of a Folktale*, one can analyse the plot of *A Tale* in the light of a structure or a form, that ultimately gives the meaning to the narrative. It is the form of the novel such as depicting a hero and a heroin, that generates meanings for the text.

Likewise the use of symbols in historical fictions also stand as the signifiers of social justice, freedom, or oppression. Such a device is used in *A Tale*. The way these symbols are defined in a narrative reflect a historical moment. Such symbols are used by the authors to comment upon power, terror and freedom, e.g. the symbol of guillotine in *A Tale of two Cities* (Legarski 2024).

### Conclusion

While conducting detailed analysis and discussion of the text of *A Tale of Two Cities* one can conclude that Dickens has intentionally employed the heavy use of literary devices so as to defamiliarize the text and to compel the reader for something significant. His intention of employing ambiguity of the language, characters, and the narrative is to invite the reader to invest his acute attention on the significance of the loss and redemption during the French Revolution. It is by far the most complex work of Charles Dickens and with the help of defamiliarization, one can penetrate into the deeper layers of meaning. It can be concluded that Dickens tries to portray love through sacrifice, illusion through characters and redemption through selflessness which coincide with the features of the Revolution. The inner struggles of the character signify the grater struggle of the people during the French Revolution.

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