

THE ROSENBACH

Charles Dickens Social Activism, Lesson Two

Level: Grades 9-12

In the last lesson, we talked about Charles Dickens's interest in social issues. In *Oliver Twist*, he focuses on the plight of the poor. In his book *A Tale of Two Cities*, he addresses the psychological effects of imprisonment and solitary confinement.

One of the main characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* is Dr. Manette, who was imprisoned in the Bastille prison in Paris for 18 years. Here is an illustration of Dr. Manette from an illustrated edition of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The young woman embracing him is his daughter.



The Shoemaker.

Charles Dickens visited Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1842, 15 years before *A Tale of Two Cities* was published. He described that visit in detail in the book *American Notes*. Many people see similarities between the way he describes the Bastille and Dr. Manette and the way he described Eastern State Penitentiary and the prisoners there. Here is an excerpt from *American Notes* in which he describes meeting one of the prisoners.

The first man I saw, was seated at his loom, at work. He had been there six years, and was to remain, I think, three more. He had been convicted as a receiver of stolen goods, but even after his long imprisonment, denied his guilt, and said he had been hardly dealt by. It was his second offence. He stopped his work when we went in, took off his spectacles, and answered freely to everything that was said to him, but always with a strange kind of pause first, and in a low, thoughtful voice. He wore a paper hat of his own making, and was pleased to have it noticed and commended. He had very ingeniously manufactured a sort of Dutch clock from some disregarded odds and ends; and his vinegar-bottle served for the pendulum. Seeing me interested in this contrivance, he looked up at it with a great deal of pride, and said that he had been thinking of improving it, and that he hoped the hammer and a little piece of broken glass beside it would play music before long. He had extracted some colours from the yarn with which he worked, and painted a few poor figures on the wall. One, of a female, over the door, he called *The Lady of the Lake*. He smiled as I looked at these contrivances to while away the time; but when I looked from them to him, I saw that his lip trembled, and could have counted the beating of his heart. I forget how it came about, but some allusion was made to his having a wife. He shook his head at the word, turned aside, and covered his face with his hands.

And here is a description of Dr. Manette from *A Tale of Two Cities*:

“Good day!” said Monsieur Defarge, looking down at the white head that bent low over the shoemaking. It was raised for a moment, and a very faint voice responded to the salutation, as if it were at a distance: “Good day!” “You are still hard at work, I see?” After a long silence, the head was lifted for another moment, and the voice replied, “Yes—I am working.” This time, a pair of haggard eyes had looked at the questioner, before the face had dropped again. The faintness of the voice was pitiable and dreadful. It was not the faintness of physical weakness, though confinement and hard fare no doubt had their part in it. Its deplorable peculiarity was, that it was the faintness of solitude and disuse. It was like the last feeble echo of a sound made long and long ago. So entirely had it lost the life and resonance of the human voice, that it affected the senses like a once beautiful colour faded away into a poor weak stain. So sunken and suppressed it was, that it was like a voice underground. So expressive it was, of a hopeless and lost creature, that a famished traveller, wearied out by lonely wandering in a wilderness, would have remembered home and friends in such a tone before lying down to die.

Some minutes of silent work had passed: and the haggard eyes had looked up again: not with any interest or curiosity, but with a dull mechanical perception, beforehand, that the spot where the only visitor they were aware of had stood, was not yet empty. "I want," said Defarge, who had not removed his gaze from the shoemaker, "to let in a little more light here. You can bear a little more?" The shoemaker stopped his work; looked with a vacant air of listening, at the floor on one side of him; then similarly, at the floor on the other side of him; then, upward at the speaker. "What did you say?"

"You can bear a little more light?" "I must bear it, if you let it in." (Laying the palest shadow of a stress upon the second word.) The opened half-door was opened a little further, and secured at that angle for the time. A broad ray of light fell into the garret, and showed the workman with an unfinished shoe upon his lap, pausing in his labour. His few common tools and various scraps of leather were at his feet and on his bench. He had a white beard, raggedly cut, but not very long, a hollow face, and exceedingly bright eyes. The hollowness and thinness of his face would have caused them to look large, under his yet dark eyebrows and his confused white hair, though they had been really otherwise; but, they were naturally large, and looked unnaturally so. His yellow rags of shirt lay open at the throat, and showed his body to be withered and worn. He, and his old canvas frock, and his loose stockings, and all his poor tatters of clothes, had, in a long seclusion from direct light and air, faded down to such a dull uniformity of parchment-yellow, that it would have been hard to say which was which.

What do you think? Do you think Dickens models Dr. Manette on the prisoner he met at Eastern State? What's similar?

After writing *American Notes* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens got a reputation for being against solitary confinement. In fact, Sonia Sotomayer quoted *American Notes* in 2018 during a case alleging that solitary confinement violates the 8th Amendment which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

The prisoner is led to the cell from which he never again comes forth, until his whole term of imprisonment has expired. He never hears of wife and children; home or friends; the life or death of any single creature. He sees the prison-officers, but with that exception he never looks upon a human countenance, or hears a human voice. He is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the mean time dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair.

The merits of solitary confinement have been debated for over a hundred years. If you are interested in researching the issue more, here is a timeline that maps out the history of solitary confinement in the United States: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>