



# A Critical Discourse Analysis on Chapter One of *A Tale of Two Cities*

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**Abstract**— This article uses Critical Discourse Analysis to elucidate the economic disparities featured in Chapter One of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The analysis focuses on the abstract, orientation, and the paradigmatic and syntagmatic links within the chapter and reveals the ways in which Chapter One sets the stage for the framework, mood and tone for the reader. It prepares the reader for the despondent and drastic occurrences to be unfolded within the novel.

**Keywords**— Critical Discourse Analysis, Economic disparities, Chapter One, Framework, Mood and tone



## I. INTRODUCTION

*A Tale of Two Cities* is a narrative discourse by Charles Dickens on eighteenth century France and England, which highlights the economic disparity between the opulent rich and the deprived poor. The term ‘discourse’ refers to ‘a stretch of language that may be longer than one sentence’ (Salkie, 1995, p. ix), whereas ‘discourse structure’ refers to three distinct but connected components (linguistic structure, intentional structure and attentional structure) within the discourse that exist simultaneously and integratively (Grosz & Snider, 1986). Harris (1951) asserts that structure is a pattern by which segments of the discourse occur (and recur) relative to each other. Taking into consideration the componential analysis afforded through critical discourse analysis, its use, thus, facilitates an in-depth understanding of any narrative. Using components of narrative discourse structure: abstract, orientation, and paradigmatic and syntagmatic links, Chapter One in *A Tale of Two Cities* will be analyzed and evaluated.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Van Dijk (2006) asserts that critical discourse analysis is focused on and motivated by the attempt to understand social issues which are relevant and pressing, particularly as it refers to power, social imbalance, and

abuse. It highlights issues in society that are not only trending but also influence actions and changes within society. Thus, it is sometimes referred to as “a social movement” of discourse analysts who are politically committed to their positions (Van Dijk, 2006).

According to Mogashoa (2014), CDA ‘is primarily positioned in the environment of language’ (p. 105). Thus, language within the text is a mirror into the minds and souls of the characters that displays their epistemologies, and reveals the collective mindset of the wider society and historical point in time. Mogashoa (2014) elaborates that the study of the textual language helps us to encounter the speakers’ ‘beliefs, positions and ideas, in terms of spoken texts like conversations’ (p. 105).

As explained by Van Dijk (2006), critical discourse analysis is not a singular method of research per se, but is an overarching all-inclusive theory that subsumes various types of discourse analysis. These types include sociolinguistics, discourse grammar, narrative analysis and conversation analysis. Whichever the type, analysis is the focus rather than just description, and the analysis generally focuses on political or social difficulties (Van Dijk, 2006).

As it relates to narrative discourse, Elson and Mckeown (2012) submit that the narrative has been used as a vehicle to convey human thought inter-generationally, or from one generation to another. Thus, as human interaction evolves, so too do the depth and complexity of the narrative.

Furthermore, Elson and Mckeown (2012) state that 'The analysis of discourse concerns the relations between clauses and sentences that make a document more than the sum of its parts' (p. 3). Likewise, Bamberg (2015) asserts that 'the referential and ideational fixity of writing orients more clearly toward intentions 'behind' the text that are to some degree now inscribed or fixated by writing' (p. 217). Thus, the narrative offers us a stative structure that presents categories and levels that can be used to examine human intention, societal complexities and political identities.

Foucault (1972) highlights the ways in which the multifunctional use of language within can assist in operationalizing 'theoretical claims about the socially constitutive properties of discourse and text' (p. 6). As such, the text mirrors what transpires in society and acts as a repository of human development. However, it is worth noting that there are many versions of discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1997). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the same text may yield differing perspective and understandings of the societal context within which it had been penned. According to Fairclough (2004), text analysis, of which linguistic analysis is a subset, is an important facet of discourse analysis. More specifically, Genette (1983) posits that the narrative discourse analysis, in particular, 'implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts...on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it' (p. 27).

Notably, narrative discourse analysis can vary based on the focus of the researcher. There is no one agreed upon prescriptive approach by the various mavens of critical discourse analysis with respect to analyzing the narrative discourse. In the case of the present paper, the focus is on diverse aspects of the text and how they help to build the message and the multiple themes within the text.

### III. NARRATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

#### The Abstract

The abstract helps the reader, because it sets the tone for the novel. According to Wood (2009),

[The] origin of an abstract term lies in the function of summarizing, or standing in place of, a narrative or narratives. The meaning of an abstraction is to be found ultimately in the kinds of stories from which it emerged. Abstraction is thus an inter-textual phenomenon. (p. 484)

The reader is, therefore, able to receive an insight into the contents of the story from inception. This is also reflected in the title of chapter one, 'The Period' and the words, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'

(Dickens, 1972, p. 1). This opening allows the reader to anticipate the action, characters and the theme. The reader can also determine that the story is set in a time that was fraught with marked upheavals, disparities and paradoxes.

Thus, connections can be made to the situation that actually existed in the 'period' in which the narrative is set. There were drastic differences between the rich and the poor belonging to that setting. For the rich, 'it was the best of times', which is revealed in the extravagant lifestyle of Monseigneur, who was seen 'in his inner room, his sanctuary of sanctuaries, the Holiest of Holiests to the crowd of worshippers in the suite of rooms without' (Dickens, 1972, p. 108). This starkly contrasted with the standard for which his office stood. His utter opulence clearly disparate to the poor for whom 'it was the worst of times', and whom The Marquis addressed as 'you dogs' (Dickens, 1972, p. 117). They are also referred to as 'the rats' (Dickens, 1972, p. 117) and 'the common wretches' (Dickens, 1972, p. 114). This vast chasm between the lifestyle of the rich and the poor engenders a rage over the unfairness of the blatant differences and disregard, and sets the stage and expectation for the impending revolution, which was to take place in France. As such, Chapter One grants the reader an insight into the chaos that would ensue later on.

#### The Orientation

There is a smooth, uninterrupted transition into another component of the narrative discourse structure, the orientation. This component gives the reader an idea of the setting and the circumstances involved. The setting in Chapter One is both spatial and temporal. The spatial and temporal settings are indicated by the deixis and the diction used. In terms of the temporal setting, one can examine the first word of the first paragraph, 'it'. This pronoun is paradigmatically linked to the time period. This is known because of the word 'times' that follows and other words in that sentence, which belong to that lexical field, for example, 'age', 'epoch', and 'season'. The pronoun 'it' is also cataphorically linked to the first sentence in paragraph three, 'It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five' (Dickens, 1972, p. 4).

#### The Temporal Setting

The temporal setting is maintained throughout the novel. The time is repeated at the end of Chapter One, 'thus did the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy – five conduct their greatneses' (Dickens, 1972, p. 6). The narrator maintains the time link by giving particular cues, such as the title in the beginning of the first chapter of Book Two, 'Five years later' (Dickens, 1972, p. 45). The time link is also presented in the last chapter of Book Two which reads, 'The August of the year one thousand seven hundred

and ninety – two was come, and Monseigneur was by this time scattered far and wide' (Dickens, 1972, p. 205). This reveals the time period in Chapter One as being the starting point around which the entire story is linked and pivoted. In order to add credibility to and underscore the time period, the narrator lists social events which have historically occurred in the stated time periods, for example, 'the spiritual messages of Mrs. Southcott' and 'the rapping out' of messages in England. Doyle (1926) declared that spiritual in London was pronounced in the 1850's, with Mrs. Hayden being a particularly influential within that time period. This links the temporal setting of chapter one to the actual historical and cultural events that had taken place heretofore and the events which were to follow in the novel.

### **Spatial Setting**

In terms of the spatial setting, the narrator uses England and France, the name of the countries that are involved. The reader is, thus, oriented towards the events and characters in these locations. These two countries are mentioned in a paralleled fashion, the parallelism being a miniature representation of the back-and-forth movement of the events between them. Moreover, this parallelism continues in the subsequent paragraphs of Chapter One. In paragraph three, the narrator focuses on the then current events in England and then shifts the readers' attention to France in the fourth paragraph. This parallelism continues throughout the novel. In Chapter Two, 'The Mail', there is an apparent shift in focus, with the events taking place in England, where the reader meets Mr. Lorry and is introduced to the circumstances surrounding Dr. Manette. By Chapter Five, 'The Wine – Shop', the reader's attention is then shifted to France once again. This narrative pendular movement continues throughout the novel, in essence moving the story, while allowing readers to compare the events.

### **Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations**

Two other elements of narrative discourse that help in the understanding of Chapter One of *A Tale of Two Cities* are the syntagmatic and paradigmatic links. The syntagmatic links assist in tying the discourse together as a cohesive unit. These links are represented in the ordering of the events and the presence of cataphora, anaphora, deixis and prolepsis. Thus, the narration starts with a description of the times, the presentation of the locations and their monarchs, a description of the events in England, followed by France's events, then England's and, finally, a commentary. This order is maintained throughout the book, highlighting the shifting scenes between England and France. It also underscores the symbiotic relationship between the two nations.

### **Cataphora**

The use of cataphoric links is a major tool used in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Such links linearly precede their linked expressions or postcedents (Pablos, Doetjes, Ruijgrok & Cheng, 2015). The most present cataphoric link, "It", was encountered from the beginning of the first chapter of the novel. The antecedent of this deictic pronoun was later disclosed in paragraph three, where the reader gets a description, elaboration and explanation of 'it'.

### **Anaphora**

Furthermore, an anaphoric link (where the link, such as a pronoun, follows its linked expression or antecedent) is seen in the use of the distal deictic adjective 'that' in 'that favored period' in the third paragraph. The reader is able to connect 'that' with the first paragraph and with the first sentence of the third paragraph, 'It was the year of Our Lord...' This is immediately paralleled with the time of the narration by the use of the proximal deictic pronoun 'this' in 'at that favoured period, as at this.' Another example of anaphora is seen in words like 'both' in the second paragraph, where 'both' refers to the two countries, which were previously mentioned, England and France. One can also identify anaphora in the second sentence of paragraph four in the phrase, 'she entertained herself', where the pronoun 'she' points back to the proper noun 'France' from the previous sentence.

### **Prolepsis**

Another syntagmatic link that can be used to examine *A Tale of Two Cities* is prolepsis. The reference to the 'Woodman, Fate', 'the Farmer, Death' and the 'tumbrils of the Revolution' is an example of prolepsis or flashforward (Simpson, 2004). These referents represent a foreshadowing of future events and are a direct link to the bloodshed and the revolution that readers encounters as they delve deeper into the narrative. The paragraph continues with the mechanism that played a particularly central but disturbing role in the French Revolution.

### **Imagery**

Moreover, imagery was employed such as the expression, 'to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it terrible in history' (Dickens, p. 5). More of this symbolic machine is mentioned in Chapter Four of Book Three, where it reads, '[a]bove all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world – the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine.' At the presentation of the term "La Guillotine", the reader would have already been prepared with the use of its foreshadowed image, introduced since chapter one.

Paragraph five, which takes the reader back to England, also has links to the rest of the novel. In this case, prolepsis is seen in the expression 'the highwayman in the dark was a tradesman in the light.' This is mirrored in the case of Jerry Cruncher who was a messenger for Tellson's Bank in the day and a 'Resurrection Man' in the night. To some degree, it is also reflected in the Defarges who sell wine outwardly but are in fact very integral to the planning and execution of the Revolution. Thus, the first chapter of the book is not only paradigmatically linked but also structurally linked internally and with the rest of the narrative discourse.

Focus on the paradigmatic links in Chapter One of the narration would reveal that these links account for coherence. While the syntagmatic links are explicit, the paradigmatic links are implied. The paradigmatic links are the parallels that can be made with the themes. One notices in the first paragraph that there are two basic themes of discernible disparity that are highlighted. One of these themes reflect hope as seen in expressions such as, 'best', 'wisdom', 'belief', 'spring of hope', 'everything before us' and 'going direct to Heaven'. These expressions can be paralleled with the new beginning Charles Darnay found in London and with Doctor Manette being 'recalled to life'. This idea of hope recurs throughout the narrative in parallel themes such as resurrection and renewal. In fact, the theme of resurrection is found in the final chapter of the book where one finds Sydney Carlton recalling the scriptural verse, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'

An occurring parallel to the theme of hope is the contrasting theme of despair. This theme of despair is seen in such expressions as 'worst', 'foolishness', 'incredulity', 'darkness', 'winter of despair', 'nothing before us' and 'going the other direction.' These opposites show a strong field of paradoxes in the opening chapter, which continue throughout the novel. One can conclude that the same era that was 'light' to some was 'darkness' to others. This theme of despair is reflected in the lives of those belonging to the lower classes. However, with the Revolution it is apparent that the fortunes of the two major classes had turned, with the despair being expressed by the upper class. It is also paralleled with the similar themes of death and the revolution. Therefore, the first chapter of the novel prepares the reader for the different themes and paradoxes in the novel.

### **Diction**

Another important element of discourse structure that contributes to an understanding of Chapter One in *A Tale of Two Cities* is that of diction. Diction refers to the words that comprise the discourse. In the first paragraph, one notices that the narrator uses temporal descriptions such

as 'times', 'age', 'epoch' and 'season'. These temporal nouns prepare the reader for a narration that will happen over a period of time. They also suggest that there may be something unique about the time over which the story was told. In the second paragraph, the narrator uses monosyllabic words to describe the monarchs of England and France. One reads, for example, '[t]here were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face' (Dickens, p. 4). The simple words seem to suggest that they were not very cognizant of the anarchy that was to come upon their countries. Therefore, in terms of the knowledge necessary to curb the impending commotions, they were simpletons.

The manner in which the year in paragraph three is expressed reflects the era in which the narration occurs. It is, therefore, consistent with the first and second paragraph. It confirms to the reader of the twenty-first century, that the story belonged to the eighteenth century. This is supported by some factual evidence, such as the 'spiritual revelations' of Mrs. Southcott in England and the 'sentencing' of the youth in France. The words used here all reflect a specific space in time and adds depth and credibility to the story. The diction in Chapter One also helps in giving the reader a sense of time and place. By the time readers conclude Chapter One, they are comfortably oriented.

The discourse narrative in Chapter One also employs a number of metaphors that help to propel the story and keep it tightly woven. From the first chapter, one encounters examples such as, 'it was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness' (Dickens, p. 4). An analysis of the terms quoted here gives readers much more information than is uttered. They are given a few metaphorical descriptions that highlight the time, though not in so many words. In the third paragraph, another type of metaphor, metonymy, is used. This is seen in the sentence, '[m]ere messages in the earthly order of events had lately come to the English Crown and People' (Dickens, p. 4). It is clear that the messages are not directed to a literal physical crown but to the king and queen who are wearing the crown.

Other figurative devices that help the narrative details to cohere include irony and personification. Irony is found in the second paragraph of Chapter One, where it reads, 'it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled forever' (Dickens, p. 4). This is ironic since nothing is further from the truth as seen in the anarchy in England and the impending Revolution in France. There is the sense that trouble is brooding in these two countries from the events stated in Chapter One such as the excesses of the rich in France, and the 'daring burglaries by armed men' (Dickens, p. 5) in England. Another clue of impending conflict is discerned in the phrase, 'rolled with exceeding

smoothness downhill.' This irony helps set a tone for the shock that greets the aristocrats because they had no time to see the displeasure and the pain of the oppressed.

The fourth paragraph also presents a combination of sarcasm and irony. Talking about France, the narrator states,

She entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards. (Dickens, p. 4)

This statement reveals the extent of horror that was the norm at that time. This is ironic since the action is described as 'humane' and is carried out 'under the guidance of Christian pastors' who are supposed to be merciful and reflect the life of Christ. This links to the event in which Monsieur the Marquis' carriage killed a child and the fact that he would not have stopped but for 'the latter inconvenience', which is that 'the horses reared and plunged' (Dickens, p. 114). The irony mentioned in Chapter One also gives the reader a reason for the terrible anger that the lower class executed in the revolution.

Additionally, examples of personification are seen in paragraph four. The narrative personifies fate and death. Reference is made to the sufferer 'already marked by the Woodman, Fate' and 'the Farmer, Death' who had already set apart victims to be 'his tumbrels of the Revolution.' One reads further, '[b]ut that Woodman and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently.' The use of personification here bestows immense power to fate and death. It underscores the inevitability of what is to take place in France. This is reiterated in Chapter Seven of Book Two where the women 'still knitted with the steadfastness of Fate' and 'so much life in the city ran into death' (Dickens, p. 98). To compound this sense of inevitability are the words 'time and tide waited for no man...all things ran their course' (Dickens, p. 117). This gives the sense that the reader is being prepared for the Revolution.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The narrative discourse structure analysis is a legitimate and significant approach to the understanding of literature. It highlights both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic links in Chapter One of *A Tale of Two Cities*. This investigation also reveals the links that extend throughout the entire novel. One can conclude that utilizing critical discourse analysis to examine the structure of the opening chapter of a text aids readers' comprehension of

that temporal position and prepares them for future unfolding events later in the narrative discourse.

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