

# Did Dickens Foretell the Modern Women's Movement?

Over the last few years, I have been on a personal quest to read various classics I failed to pick up during my school years. The most recent of these was Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I finished over the weekend.

In reflecting on the book, I could explain how classic titles challenge one's thinking and comprehension so much more than modern ones, or how they draw on such a broad spectrum of cultural literacy, or even how they place such a heavy emphasis on the theme of redemption.

But none of those items were my main takeaway from the book. My takeaway was something much more odd and obscure and maybe even laughable because it had to do with "the knitters."

For those – who like my recent self – have never cracked *A Tale of Two Cities*, the main antagonists are Monsieur and Madame Defarge, the working class owners of a wine-shop in Paris, who become heavy agitators in the French Revolution. Although initially friendly to the family of the book's protagonist, the Defarges become the family's main enemies as they attempt to have them all placed under the blade of the guillotine.

Throughout the book, Madame Defarge is rarely ever without her knitting, which she uses to record secret information about her future victims. She soon becomes the driving force behind the bloody Revolution, leading an army of knitters who gleefully tally severed heads. This army of women is referred to as the "sisterhood," which creates a united front against compassion, runs high on emotionalism, and refuses to embrace rational thought or discourse. In short, Dickens' portrayal of the "sisterhood" seems almost like a caricature designed to

ensure that we recognize the absolute insanity which drove the Revolution's killing spree.

Yet in spite of this seeming caricature, I couldn't help but notice how much Madame Defarge and her company seemed a forerunner of the women's marches which took place in early 2017.

Like Defarge's forces, the modern women's marches made knitting their signature craft, equipping the heads of the sisterhood with pink pussy hats.

Like Defarge's forces, the modern women's marches seemed to be fed by anger at past injustices and violated rights.

And like Defarge's forces, the modern women's movement seemed to focus on emotional responses to problems rather than a rational, thought-filled, and logical discourse over their grievances and those of the opposing side.

The happy difference between Defarge's quest for equality and the modern women's marches, however, is that one ended in a brutal bloodbath while the other has not. That said, it seems highly unlikely that the women's marches – and many other recent rumblings of unrest – have disappeared for good.

Unless we learn to ground our societal grievances in rational and logical discourse, are we in danger of being carried away by the bloody and irrational emotionalism which characterized the French Revolution?

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