Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* stretches the boundaries of the believable in every way, from small details like the lethality of Jerry Cruncher’s spiky hair to the heartbreaking moment when the cynical drunk Sydney Carton sacrifices himself for his bitter enemy. Contrary to other writings, there is both rhyme and reason to Dickens’ amplified telling of the revolutionary epoch. This is evident in his attentive consideration of syntax, imagery, and parallel structure. Dickens manages to connect events chapters apart with parallel structure, stressing the depravity of the revolutionaries, the misfortune of the lower classes, and other themes in the serial novel. The opening paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities* is most notable for its parallelism, which highlights the class separations at play. This comparison forms a crucial backbone for the entire novel. Dickens also juxtaposes the drinking habits of the aristocrats and peasants, whose craven desire for wine is a symbol of their hunger and their bloodlust.

Throughout his seminal novel, Charles Dickens uses parallel structure to illuminate socioeconomic disparities during the French Revolution.

The story begins between two urban hubs of poverty, prosperity, enlightenment, ignorance, morality and sin. The gulf of feeling in the serial novel is slowly widened as the plot progresses. In the first chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens uses this literary element to enunciate gaps between the socioeconomic classes. Perhaps the reason why Dickens’ makeshift novel lasted centuries was due to his opening sentence, in which the author juxtaposes the various lifestyles in the day and age and forms a stark contrast that will lay the groundwork for the rest of the novel. Dickens writes, “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 epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it
was the winter of despair” (1). In this quote, Dickens uses a parallel structure to form a bond between classes undergoing different struggles. Dickens’ use of parallel sentence structures in his opening paragraph guarantees that the rest of the novel will unfold naturally. By making these not-so-apparent connections, the writer forms an interdependence between the classes. This primary paragraph in the book is arguably the most important, linking two utterly dissimilar lifestyles to create intrigue and potential conflict. Dickens continues to synthesize a mood of unrest in the next few sentences. “...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” (1). This quote is a prime example of two very different cultures forced to coexist with each other in the same country and at the same time. The first paragraph of A Tale of Two Cities not only puts the gulf between social classes into perspective, but also prepares the reader for guaranteed conflict.

The idea of conflict between socioeconomic classes is further stressed in early chapters. As the author enunciates the gap between two drastically different situations, he routinely uses parallelism as a literary element. Dickens’ use of parallel structure presents the anguish of the peasants and excessiveness of the aristocrats in an even more extreme light. Such is the case in Book the First, when Dickens’ juxtaposing paragraphs create contrast that is interesting to the audience. However, what is more intriguing is the continued use of these literary elements in Book the Second, when Dickens compares the drinking rituals of the poor and the wealthy. Juxtaposition in this situation stresses the class separation of the late 1700s, preparing the reader for the ever-approaching French Revolution. In Book the First, Chapter 5, The Wine Shop, Dickens writes, “All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine… Others, men and women, dipped in the puddles with little mugs of mutilated earthenware, or even with handkerchiefs from women’s heads, which were
squeezed dry into infants’ mouths” (24-25). The description of the broken wine cask in front of the wine shop is meant to illustrate the true hunger and squalid living conditions of the peasants, who are so desperate for nourishment that they will feed vile wine to their babies through dirty rags. This picture is also used as contrast with the description in Book the Second, Chapter 7, Monseigneur in Town. In this chapter, the hot chocolate-drinking process of a noble is described: “It took four men, all four a-blaze with gorgeous decoration, and the Chief of them unable to exist with fewer than two gold watches in his pocket, emulative of the noble and chaste function set by Monseigneur, to conduct the happy chocolate to Monseigneur’s lips” (94-95). This quote, which describes the over-the-top and frivolous nature of an average noble’s drinking process, juxtaposes the description from the earlier chapters. While Monseigneur’s lavish four-man chocolate serving emulates unnecessary extravagance, the drinking of the wine by the peasants represents the other end of the spectrum. These descriptions, with a similar theme and thus parallel structures, present the true separation of the classes and prepare the reader for further turmoil and the French Revolution.

As A Tale of Two Cities progresses in plot and character development, so too does the conflict and tension. Based on parallel sentence structures and themes, Dickens has paraded socioeconomic divides in an ultimately heavy handed manner. In events like the wine scene, the author makes no attempt to gloss over the Revolution’s sharp edges, and instead chooses to weave a gilded tapestry of inequality. Some may think that Dickens’ concentrated use of parallel structures and themes is blatant and jejune, but his harsh and realistic craft probably stems from his actual life. Having lived as an impoverished child factory worker and a wealthy, highly acclaimed writer, Dickens has been afforded the rare opportunity to scrutinize both sides of the fence. It is possible that the everlasting discordance between the classes is Dickens’ own way of
reflecting on the events of his life and the gulf between these events. In this sense, *A Tale of Two Cities* stands on a shelf of its own as one of the most realistic and personal pieces of classic literature, with literary elements like juxtaposition and parallelism simply acting as a megaphone for Dickens’ informed views.