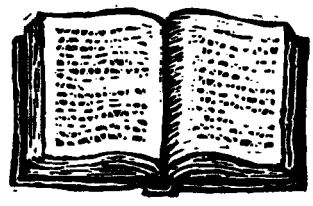
A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens

1859

A Tale of Two Cities occupies a central place in the canon of Charles Dickens's works. This novel of the French Revolution was originally serialized in the author's own periodical *All the Year Round.* Weekly publication of chapters 1-3 of Book 1 began on April 30, 1859. In an innovative move, Dickens simultaneously released installments of the novel on a monthly basis, beginning with all of Book 1 in June and concluding with the last eight chapters of Book 3 in December. Dickens took advantage of the novel's serial publication to experiment with characterization, plot, and theme. He described the work in a letter to his friend John Forster, cited in Ruth Glancy's *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel,* as "a picturesque story rising in every chapter, with characters true to nature, but whom the story should express more than they should express themselves by dialogue." The novel that emerged from his experimentation is now regarded as one of Dickens's most popular and most innovative works.

Dickens's work was very popular with the reading public when it was first published. One review in the magazine *Athenaeum* stated that *A Tale of Two Cities* had attracted the praise of a hundred thousand readers. On the other hand, a whole set of critics, most notably Sir James Fitzjames Stephen writing in *Saturday Review,* criticized the novel precisely for its popularity. "Most of the critics writing in the intellectual and literary journals of the day considered popular success a good reason to condemn a work," explains Glancy. "If the



Charles Dickens

public liked it, they certainly could not be seen to approve of it at all." Modern critical opinion, however, has given the novel an important place among Dickens's most mature works of fiction.

Author Biography

From the time he was twenty-one, Charles Dickens knew he would not be the great actor he had imagined, nor even the journalist he next attempted to be. Instead, he felt he was destined to become a great novelist. He not only had experiences with the same joys and tragedies his characters would have, but he also had the great talent to make his readers feel and see all these experiences in detail. The second of eight children of John and Elizabeth Dickens, Charles was born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England. His early childhood was a happy one. Though plagued by frequent illnesses, his first years were also filled with exciting stories told to him by his parents and his nurse.

However, when Dickens was twelve, his family moved to London, where his father was imprisoned for debts he could not pay. Charles was forced to go to work pasting labels on bottles at a bootblack factory. Although this job lasted less than a year, he often felt hungry and abandoned, especially compared to his sister Frances, who continued studying at the Royal Academy of Music, where she was winning awards. For Dickens, the injustice was almost more than he could stand, and his suffering was multiplied by his mother's delight about the job that he always remembered with hatred.

Although his critics are the first to say that *Great Expectations* is not directly autobiographical, Dickens's own words tell us that he resented having to work in the factory, where he dreamed of the better life he felt he deserved, much as Pip is eager to leave Joe's forge. Also, Dickens's essay "Travelling Abroad" describes a small boy who rides in a coach with Dickens past his grand house, Gad's Hill. Although the boy in the essay does not know Dickens or that this is the great author's house, he remarks that his father has told him that hard work will earn him this house, which Dickens had also admired for years before finally being able to afford it in 1856. Dickens's familiarity with youthful expectations and later-life remembrances of them are clear in this reflection.

Likewise, Dickens's first love for Maria Beadnell so impressed him by its horrible failure that even years later he could barely speak of it to his friend and biographer, John Forster. All that Dickens had written about her he later burned. He believed that Maria had rejected him because of social class differences, since Dickens had not yet established his writing career at the time and Maria's father was a banker. Decades later, his character Miss Havisham would burn, shooting up flames twice her size, in compensation for her cold heart.

Dickens's marriage to Catherine (Kate) Hogarth, the daughter of a newspaper editor, in 1836 produced ten children. Their union ended in separation in 1858, however. By the time *Great Expectations* was published in 1860, Dickens had known his mistress Ellen Ternan—an actress he had met when he became interested in the stage—for several years, and he established a separate household in which he lived with Ternan. It would not be until after the author's death, however, that Dickens's daughter would make the affair public. Ternan was twenty-seven years younger than Dickens, a fact that resembles the age difference between the happy, later-life couple Joe and Biddy in *Great Expectations.* Dickens protected his privacy because he was worried about his reputation as a

respected writer and the editor of *Household Words,* a family magazine. Such turmoil and ecstasy in Dickens's intimate relationships have since been compared to the misery and bliss of couples in his novels.

If anything, Dickens's descriptions of suffering were and still are his chief endearing quality to readers who find them both realistic and empathetic. Beginning with *Bleak House* in 1852, Dickens is widely acknowledged to have entered a "dark period" of writing. Yet he seemed to enjoy his continuing popularity with readers and to ignore his critics' remarks that his stories were too melodramatic. While readers have long accepted that tendency, they have also warmed to Dickens's love of humor.

Critics suggest that the part of Dickens's life that is most reflected in *A Tale of Two Cities* is his personal relationships with his wife and Ellen Ternan. In 1855, he reestablished contact with his childhood sweetheart Maria Beadnell, but he was very disappointed with their meeting and depicted his disillusionment in the 1857 novel *Little Dorrit.* A quarrel with his publishers Bradbury & Evans over his mistress's reputation led Dickens to turn to a new publishing house, Chapman & Hall, to publish *A Tale of Two Cities.* Some critics suggest that Dickens's depiction of Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* and the behavior of the two principal characters, Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay, toward her, reflects his own attitude toward Ternan.

Dickens died of a brain aneurysm in June 1870. Although he had expressly wished to be buried at his country home, Gad's Hill, his request was disregarded, apparently owing to his fame. Instead, he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, London.

Plot Summary

Book One: Recalled to Life

On a cold November night in 1775, Mr. Jarvis Lorry, who works for Tellson's Bank, tells a messenger who stops his mail coach to return with the message, "Recalled to Life," in *A Tale of Two Cities.* That evening in a Dover hotel he meets Miss Lucie Manette, a young woman whom Lorry brought to England as an orphaned child many years earlier and whom he is now to return with to France to recover her father, recently released from prison after eighteen years.

In Paris, Mr. Lorry and Miss Manette arrive at the wine shop of Madame and Monsieur Defarge. In a top floor garret room above the shop, working away at a shoemaker's bench, sits an old, white-haired man, too feeble and too altered to recognize his daughter. With the help of Lorry and Defarge, Lucie takes Dr. Manette away in a carriage to return him to London.

Book Two: The Golden Thread

On a March morning in 1780, Mr. Charles Darnay is being tried at the Old Bailey for treason. In the court as witnesses are Dr. Manette and his daughter Lucie, who testifies that on the night five years earlier when she was returning with her father from France, the prisoner comforted her and her father aboard the boat on which they crossed the channel. Darnay is acquitted after the counsel for the defense, Mr. Stryver, befuddles a witness by presenting Mr. Sydney Carton, who so closely resembles Mr. Darnay that the witness is unable to stand by his story. Mr. Jerry Cruncher, messenger for hire, rushes the news of the acquittal to Tellson's Bank, as he was instructed to do by Mr. Lorry. Outside the courtroom, everyone congratulates Darnay on his release.

In France, meanwhile, both the abuses of the aristocracy and the furor of the oppressed grow. Monseigneur, the Marquis St. Evremonde, "one of the great lords in power at the court," drives off in a gilded carriage and runs over a child. He tosses a gold coin to the child's grieving father, Gaspard. Someone throws a coin at the carriage, but when the Marquis looks to see who, he sees only Madame Defarge, knitting. She knits into a scarf growing longer by the day the names in symbols of those who will later die at the hands of the revolutionaries. Later at his chateau, the Marquis asks if "Monsieur Charles" has yet arrived from England. Charles Darnay, the nephew, tells the Marquis that he believes his family has done wrong and that he wishes to redress the wrongs of the past. The Marquis, who scorns Darnay's suggestions, is later found stabbed to death in his bed.

Lucie and her father live in a London apartment with her maid, Miss Pross. Darnay prospers as a teacher in France and visits England frequently. He speaks of his love of Lucie to Dr. Manette, who grants his permission for a marriage, although he refuses to hear until the wedding day the secret of his identity which Darnay tries to tell

him. Sydney Carton, self-described wastrel and unsuccessful suitor, tells Lucie he is "a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you."

At the Defarge wine shop, local anger over the execution of Gaspard and the news that Lucie Manette is about to marry Charles Darnay, a French Marquis, grows. All the women knit.

After Lucie and Darnay go off to honeymoon, Mr. Lorry discovers Dr. Manette making shoes, lapsed into an absent mental state which lasts for nine days while Lucie is away. On the tenth day of Dr. Manette's mania, he recovers, converses with Mr. Lorry about a "friend" who suffered similarly, and agrees to have the things of his old occupation—his shoemaking bench and tools which he had returned to in his distress—destroyed for his mental well-being.

On a July evening in 1789 Lucie Darnay, now the mother of a six-year-old girl, sits and worries over the future. Mr. Lorry speaks of the run on Tellson's Bank as a consequence of the turmoil in Paris. There citizens storm the Bastille to free its seven prisoners. Among them are Madame and Monsieur Defarge, who find Manette's old cell. The people of St. Antoine hang a man named Foulon, who had once told the starving people to eat grass. They seek out aristocrats with a frenzy. One evening they burn down the chateau of the Marquis.

> The château was left to itself to flame and burn. In the roaring and raging of the conflagration, a red-hot wind, driving straight from the infernal regions, seemed to be blowing the edifice away. With the rising and falling of the blaze, the stone faces showed as if they were in torment. When great masses of stone and timber fell, the face with the two dints in the nose became obscured: anon struggled out of the smoke again, as if it were the face of the cruel Marquis, burning at the stake and contending with the fire.

In August of 1792, Mr. Lorry is about to embark on a trip to Paris to organize accounts there. Darnay learns from him that the bank has been holding an unopened letter addressed to "Monsieur Heretofore the Marquis," whom he says he knows. The letter from Monsieur Gabelle, a servant, begs St. Evremonde/Darnay to come to France to free him from the mob who hold him. Darnay resolves to leave for France, for his honor demands it. He leaves a letter to Lucie, but he does not tell her his identity or purpose.

Book Three: The Track of a Storm

On his way to Paris, Darnay is captured, imprisoned, charged with being an aristocratic emigrant, now to suffer the justice of the revolution. Lucie and her father have also hastened to France to meet Mr. Lorry at Tellson's Paris bank. Dr. Manette uses his influence as one formerly imprisoned to calm the revolutionaries and to have Darnay's life spared during the Reign of Terror when the King and Queen and 1100 others lose their lives to the guillotine. Yet shortly thereafter, Darnay is again arrested, charged by the Defarges and "one other."

Miss Pross and Jerry Cruncher, with the Manettes in Paris, come upon a man on the streets whom they identify as Miss Pross's lost brother. Sydney Carton then pursues the man's identity to reveal that he is John Barsad, who had been involved in Darnay's trial in England and who had spied for the English. Carton uses this knowledge as leverage to persuade Barsad, a turnkey at the prison, to work for him.

At the second trial, Darnay is denounced by the Defarges and "the other," who is no other than Dr. Manette himself! Defarge tells how when he stormed the Bastille, he found in Manette's old cell a paper in Manette's hand in a crevice in the wall. He proceeds to read the paper. Manette's story dates to 1857 when he was summoned by two men, the twin St. Evremondes, to attend to a dying peasant woman and a dying, peasant boy, wounded fighting in her defense. The woman had been raped by the two men. They tried to pay Manette off, but he refused; when he tried to write to authorities regarding their case, they destroyed his letter and threatened to kidnap his wife. He then denounced them and their descendants (and thus Charles Darnay). Darnay is condemned to die within 24 hours.

After Carton takes Lucie home, he visits the Defarges, where Madame Defarge reveals that the woman in Manette's story was her sister. He returns to the Manettes that evening to find that Dr. Manette has this time been unsuccessful in freeing Darnay. Carton instructs Lorry on plans to have the Manettes escape Paris the next day. "The moment I come to you," he says, "take me in and drive away." Carton enters the prison and Darnay's cell with the help of Barsad. He drugs Darnay, then exchanges clothes with him. Barsad carries Darnay out; Carton remains behind. The Manettes, Darnay, and Mr. Lorry all escape in a carriage. Miss Pross and Jerry Cruncher also devise a plan of escape. While Cruncher goes for a carriage, Madame De-

farge, armed with a gun and a knife, comes to the apartment to execute Lucie and her daughter, confronts Miss Pross, and dies of a gunshot in the ensuing struggle. Miss Pross and Cruncher escape, the former forever after deaf. Carton is executed as Darnay, willingly giving his life for the one he loves.

Characters

John Barsad

See Solomon Pross

Sydney Carton

Sydney Carton is a dissipated English lawyer who spends a great deal of his life drunk. Although he has a brilliant legal mind, his alcoholism keeps him from becoming a success. He first enters *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1780, during Charles Darnay's trial for espionage. Darnay is acquitted because of his uncanny resemblance to Carton, thus casting doubts on the testimony of his accusers. Carton works in an unofficial partnership with another lawyer, C. J. Stryver. Although Carton's legal mind was mostly responsible for Darnay's acquittal, his coarse manners and habitual drunkenness contrast with his double's refinement and politeness. Carton falls in love with Lucie Manette and, when she marries Darnay, asks to be considered a friend of the family with the privilege of visiting them from time to time. His devotion to Lucie is the major factor in his decision to take Darnay's place in prison and be guillotined in 1793.

Understanding the character of Carton is difficult for the reader. We know nothing of his past life or of the reasons that have kept him single into his forties (the age at which he enters the novel). His only major weakness is his alcoholism, which in Victorian times was regarded as a character flaw rather than a disease; his redeeming grace is his love for Lucie, which persuades him to sacrifice himself so that she and her family can escape. Ironically, Carton does this by passing himself off as Darnay and taking his place on the scaffold.

Carton is Darnay's alter-ego in several senses of the phrase. He is English, while Darnay is French; coarse-mannered, while Darnay is polite; and alcoholic, while Darnay is temperate. They are united only in their mutual love for Lucie Manette. But it is Carton in the end who succeeds in rescuing the Darnays—Lucie, her husband, and their little daughter—from the fate planned for them by the Revolutionary authorities. On the scaffold Carton has a vision in which he sees that through his execution he creates a memory that Lucie and Darnay will preserve for generations to come. Carton foresees that his namesake, Sydney Darnay, will become a famous judge, fulfilling the career that Carton wanted for himself but could not get. At the

Media Adaptations

- Dickens made a lot of money by reading selections from his works aloud before an audience. His own version of *A Tale of Two Cities,* which he prepared but never actually performed, was entitled *The Bastille Prisoner. A Reading. From "A Tale of Two Cities". In Three Chapters.* It was published by William Clowes of London, probably in the early 1860s. The text of *The Bastille Prisoner* can also be found in *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings,* published in Oxford by the Clarendon Press, 1975.
- The 1935 MGM film *A Tale of Two Cities,* featuring Ronald Colman as Sydney Carton, Basil Rathbone as the Marquis St. Evremonde, and Elizabeth Allan as Lucie, received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Editing. It is still regarded as the best film version of Dickens's novel.
- Burbank Films animated *A Tale of Two Cities* and released it in 1984. The film is available on videocassette.
- PBS television's *Masterpiece Theatre* produced *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1991. It featured James Wilby, Serena Gordon, and John Mills in leading roles, and it is available on videocassette.
- *A Tale of Two Cities* was recorded as a radio play by BBC Radio 4, featuring Charles Dance as Carton, John Duttine as Darnay, Maurice Denham as Dr. Manette, and Charlotte Attenborough as Lucie. It was released in the United States in 1989 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio, 1989.

Still from the 1935 movie A Tale of Two Cities, *starring Ronald Colman (right) as Sydney Carton.*

end of *A Tale of Two Cities,* Carton becomes a Christ-figure, a godlike being who redeems the blood shed in the name of freedom and brotherhood. Through his heroic self-sacrifice, Carton redeems the sins of the St. Evremondes in a way that the purer Darnay could not do.

Jerry Cruncher

Jerry Cruncher is the literal symbol of Dickens's theme of resurrection in *A Tale of Two Cities.* Cruncher is a "resurrection man"—he steals fresh corpses from graveyards and delivers them to medical schools so that students can study human anatomy. His values are upside-down; he regards body-snatching as honest work and prayer as weakness. He also works as a porter for Mr. Jarvis Lorry's bank, Tellson's, and helps make Sydney Carton's rescue of the Darnays successful. In the end, Cruncher is impressed by Carton's sacrifice and by the Darnays and resolves to reform.

Charles Darnay

Charles Darnay, or St. Evremonde, is the nephew and heir of the Marquis St. Evremonde, the wicked aristocrat who is responsible for the imprisonment of Dr. Manette. However, Charles has renounced his wicked uncle's fortune, has adopted his mother's maiden name, and has taken a position as a tutor in the French language in England. Darnay is caught up in the events of the French Revolution. In 1781, while trying to help a woman that his family had injured, he is arrested as a spy and placed on trial in England. There he meets Lucie Manette and marries her; they have several children. Darnay is caught in France in 1792 while trying to help a former family servant; he is arrested and sentenced to be executed on the basis of a letter written by Dr. Manette during his years of imprisonment (1757-1775). He is rescued by his English double, Sydney Carton, who takes his place and is executed in his stead.

Like his wife Lucie Manette, Charles Darnay is a largely passive character. Although his manners and behavior are impeccable and his intentions are well-meant, he is incapable of performing the important tasks to which he commits himself. Both his arrests take place while he is in the process of trying to extract friends or former servants from difficulties. Darnay is also like Dr. Manette because of the time he spends unjustly confined in prison. It takes Carton's sacrifice to release Darnay from the cycle of arrests.

Some critics believe that Dickens viewed Darnay as a version of himself. The character shares the author's initials (C.D.) and his relationship with Carton may reflect a split in Dickens's own psy-

che between his heroic, honorable side and his baser nature.

Lucie Darnay

Lucie Manette, Dr. Manette's daughter, at the age of seventeen discovers her father's existence in a French jail. As an infant she was carried off to England by Mr. James Lorry and is raised there in the belief that her father is dead. She travels with Mr. Lorry once again in 1775 to rescue Dr. Manette. Later she marries protagonist Charles Darnay and gives birth to young Lucie, their daughter. Like many other Victorian literary heroines, Lucie tends to give the impression that she is frail and delicate; she faints easily and is earnestly committed to the salvation of her husband and to the future of her children. Lucie is primarily a passive character whose purpose is to be the object of devotion of Sydney Carton, Charles Darnay, and Dr. Manette.

Some critics have suggested that Dickens's portrayal of Lucie is based in part on his own feelings for the actress Ellen Ternan and that Lucie is an idealized version of Ellen. Others see her as an expression of his memories of his childhood friend Lucy Stroughill, or a version of the heroine Lucy of Dickens's 1856 play *The Wreck of the Golden Mary.* "Golden-haired" Lucie Manette, according to these interpretations, is an expression of the light (the name Lucie is derived from a word meaning "light") that opposes the darkness and hatred of the Revolutionary figures, especially Therese Defarge. Like the light, Lucie is largely passive; she does not transform herself, but those who are illuminated by her love are transformed themselves. It is Lucie's affection that makes Sydney Carton resolve to sacrifice himself for her family's safety. Lucie is a catalyst; she does not change anything herself, but she is the cause of change in others.

Ernest Defarge

Dickens presents the husband of the vengeful Madame Defarge, Ernest Defarge, as another force in the Revolution; a less driven, but still flawed, example of the French common people. Ernest Defarge had served Dr. Manette as a servant before the doctor was imprisoned by the Marquis St. Evremonde and has some affectionate feelings for him when he is released. Defarge later becomes an important Revolutionary leader. However, Defarge exploits Dr. Manette's insanity, opening his prison to curious gapers who want to gawk at the unfortunate madman. Unlike his wife, Ernest Defarge is not interested in pursuing Lucie Darnay and her daughter to their deaths. At the end of the book, Carton foresees Defarge's own death on the guillotine at the hands of his revolutionary companions.

Madame Therese Defarge

Madame Defarge is the symbol of the evils brought forth by the French Revolution. Her entire family was destroyed by the St. Evremonde clan; her sister was raped by the Marquis St. Evremonde—Charles Darnay's uncle—and her brother died at the aristocrat's hands. Because of this tragedy, Defarge has conceived an intense hatred for the St. Evremondes, including Charles Darnay himself, as well as the rest of the aristocratic class. Madame Defarge plots the downfall of the St. Evremondes and other aristocrats with almost infinite patience, working the names of those whom she hates into her knitting. She plots Darnay's arrest in 1792 and the eventual deaths of his entire family, demonstrating the depths of her hatred. Madame Defarge represents the uncontrollable forces of the French Revolution. She is killed in a struggle with Miss Pross, Lucie's nurse, when her pistol goes off accidentally.

Charles St. Evremonde

See Charles Darnay

Marquis St. Evremonde

The Marquis St. Evremonde parallels the animalistic evil of Madame Therese Defarge. He is the image of the uncaring aristocrat of the *ancien regime.* He was responsible for both the imprisonment of Dr. Manette and for the rape of Therese Defarge's sister and the death of the rest of her family. He is also responsible for the death of Gaspard's young son, whom he runs down in his coach. Dickens stresses the Marquis's lack of humanity and predatory nature by comparing him to a tiger.

Jarvis Lorry

Jarvis Lorry is the representative of Tellson's Bank, an old, established English institution. He serves partly as a means of progressing the plot and partly as a symbol of English middle-class virtue. It was Mr. Lorry who rescued the infant Lucie Manette and took her to safety in England when her father was arrested and her mother died. It is Mr. Lorry who goes to retrieve Dr. Manette after his eighteen years in prison. Finally, it is Mr. Lorry who aids Carton in his deception of the French authorities in order to rescue the Darnays from Revolutionary France. Mr. Lorry serves as well as a

way of introducing one of the novel's major themes: the idea of imprisonment and redemption. He dreams of literally "resurrecting" Dr. Manette, who has been buried alive for nearly twenty years; yet Mr. Jarvis confines himself in the jail-like recesses of Tellson's.

Dr. Alexandre Manette

Dr. Manette is one of the central characters in *A Tale of Two Cities.* He was imprisoned at the start of the story because he had tried to bring the crimes of two of the St. Evremondes, members of a noble family, to public trial. The St. Evremondes have conspired to keep Manette in prison for eighteen years and this confinement is one of the major plot points of the novel. The doctor's incarceration has cost him his sanity. He can only remember his cell number. When he is first rescued from his prison he believes he is a cobbler, and when he comes under stress his insanity reasserts itself. He first begins to revive when the sight of his daughter Lucie recalls memories of his dead wife. He collapses into insanity again when he discovers his son-in-law is a member of the hated Evremonde clan, and still again when Darnay is imprisoned in Paris and threatened with beheading.

Dr. Manette's major function is to set the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* in motion, but some critics consider his sane and insane personalities to represent the Victorian literary fascination with duality. His dual personas also illustrate the social split taking place in France during the "Terror," and the differences between Paris and London, the two cities of the title. Some critics also suggest that Manette's character reflects the author's own personality. They trace parallels between Manette's career as a physician and his selflessness in reporting the abuses of the nobility with Dickens's career as a journalist and advocate for social improvement. They also see similarities between Manette's creation, in his madness, of a world in which he is only a cobbler and Dickens's creation of secondary worlds in his novels.

Lucie Manette

See Lucie Darnay

Miss Pross

Miss Pross is Lucie Manette Darnay's nurse, then her companion and nurse to her daughter Little Lucie during the traumatic months spent in Revolutionary Paris. She is also the sister of the English spy Solomon Pross (John Barsad). In some ways Miss Pross is a stereotypical Englishwoman; she is blunt-spoken, nationalistic, and short-tempered, but she is also good-hearted and devoted to Lucie. She opposes the darkness of the revolutionary Madame Therese Defarge. In a climactic struggle, Miss Pross kills Madame Defarge while trying to keep her from discovering that the Darnays have fled from Paris.

Solomon Pross

Solomon Pross is the brother of Miss Pross, Lucie Manettte's nurse. He works as a spy under the name John Barsad, first for the English and then for the French government. Carton foresees in his final vision that Barsad will be caught and executed during the "Terror."

C. J. Stryver

C. J. Stryver is the quasi-law partner of Sydney Carton. He makes his living by exploiting Carton's legal mind. Unlike Carton, Stryver is motivated and active, but he is also unprincipled and in the end unredeemed. He courts Lucie Manette briefly and, after she chooses Darnay, pretends that he had rejected her.

The Vengeance

The Vengeance is Madame Therese Defarge's chosen companion. As her title suggests, her entire identity is swallowed by her desire for revenge on the aristocratic class.

Themes

Order and Disorder

The story of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place during the turbulent years of the French Revolution. Dickens stresses the chaos of Revolutionary France by using images of the ocean. He calls the Paris mob a "living sea," and compares Ernest Defarge to a man caught in a whirlpool. Defarge and his wife are both at the center of revolutionary activity in Paris, just as their lives are at the center of the whirlpool. Order breaks down once again in the second chapter of the third book, "The Grindstone." "Dickens deliberately set Darnay's return to Paris and arrest at the time of the September Massacres," writes Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel,* "a four-day execution of 1,089 prisoners from four Paris prisons, condemned in minutes each by ... 'sudden Courts of Wild Justice.'" Contrasted to the chaos of Paris is the order of England: Dr. Manette's

peaceful home in Soho is a place of refuge for Darnay, Carton, and Mr. Lorry, while even Tellson's Bank serves as a center of calmness in the whirlpool of Revolutionary Paris.

Death and Resurrection

Death, burial, and resurrection are themes that Dickens returns to again and again in *A Tale of Two Cities.* The first book of the novel, "Recalled to Life," traces the resurrection of Dr. Manette, who has been held in prison for almost twenty years. Prisons, for Dickens, are symbolic of the grave—a comparison that he makes throughout his works, and which may be related to his father's imprisonment in the debtors' prison at Marshalsea. Mr. Lorry, who travels to Paris in 1775 to secure the doctor's release, views himself as literally digging up Dr. Manette's body. He fancies that the doctor has been buried for so long that he will fall to pieces upon being liberated: "Got out at last, with earth hanging around his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust." Even the doctor's daughter Lucie, whom he has never seen, believes that the person who will emerge from the prison will be a ghost rather than a living man. Like a man brought back to life, Manette cannot quite shake the hold his burial and rebirth has on his mind. He reverts to his cobbling—a sign of his madness contracted in prison—during periods of stress, but he is finally redeemed by his daughter's love and his own forgiveness of Darnay for the crimes of the St. Evremondes.

Other characters are also absorbed in Dickens's death imagery. Jerry Cruncher, the Tellson's Bank messenger, is also a "resurrection man"—a person who steals fresh corpses from graveyards and sells them to medical schools for use as anatomy specimens. Charles Darnay is imprisoned and released twice in the course of the novel; the second time, it takes another death, Sydney Carton's, to secure Darnay's freedom. Madame Defarge, consumed by a desire for vengeance, finds her death in a tussle with Miss Pross. In addition, in his final moments Carton foresees the deaths of a large number of minor characters, including the spies Barsad and Cly, the revolutionary leaders Defarge and the woman known as The Vengeance, and the judge and jury who condemned Darnay to death. Revolutionary anarchy and hatred consume these people, but the Darnays, Dr. Manette, Mr. Lorry, and especially Carton, are redeemed through their love and self-sacrifice.

Topics for Further Study

- Investigate contemporary accounts of the French Revolution, concentrating on the "Terror"—the months between the summers of 1793 and 1794—and compare them to Dickens's own version of the story.
- Compare the character of Maximilian Robespierre, the most powerful man in France during the "Terror," to that of the fictional Madame Defarge.
- Many critics consider Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay as two sides of a single character. Some of them have suggested that this split in the novel reflects the split in Dickens's own life: at the time he was writing, his marriage was breaking up and he was consorting with a younger woman. What evidence is there for this in the novel?
- The title of the book *A Tale of Two Cities* refers to the two cities of Paris and London. Compare and contrast Dickens's presentation of the two. Why did the author consider them central to his story?
- Dr. Manette is often said by other characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* to be "resurrected"—to have been rescued from the grave and brought back to life. Trace the way this theme of "resurrection" occurs throughout the novel.
- Research the history of the Chartist Movement and other reform movements in Victorian Britain. What parallels does Dickens draw between the abuses of the French Revolution and the kind of society that opposed reform in England during his own life?

Memory and Reminiscence

A Tale of Two Cities is a historical novel, about events approximately seventy years past when Dickens wrote the work. For the author in *A Tale of Two Cities,* memory is often a trap, pulling people into an abyss of despair. Madame Defarge's ha-

tred of aristocrats in general and St. Evremonde in particular is based on her memory of the rape and deaths of her siblings at his hands. However, it can also be a force for redemption. It is Dr. Manette's memory of his dead wife, seen in his daughter's face, that begins his process of resurrection from the grave of his prison and madness. "Darnay ... listens to the voices from his past," states Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel;* "his desire to right the wrongs of his family is primarily due to his mother's reliance on him to do so." Perhaps most interesting, however, is Sydney Carton and his relationship to memory. His colleague C. J. Stryver calls him "Memory Carton" for his brilliant legal mind. Dickens's portrayal of Carton, however, shows him inspired by the memory of his love for Lucie to renounce his passive life. "When Carton dies with the words 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done,' he is renouncing the mental prison that has prevented him from making something of his life," writes Glancy; "he is living dynamically, as Doctor Manette does, and even if for him the action will soon be over, its repercussions will be felt for as long as the Darnay family survives."

Style

Setting

The chief characteristic of *A Tale of Two Cities* that sets it apart from Dickens's other novels is its historical setting. Most of the author's works comment on contemporary English society; *A Tale of Two Cities* does this, too, but not as directly as, say, *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations.* Dickens contrasts late eighteenth-century Paris and London both to advance the plot and to draw conclusions about the nature of freedom and the redeeming power of love. The novel begins in England, and most of the first book takes place in that country. In the second book, chapters alternate between the English and the French settings, and the third is set almost entirely in France. "At the beginning of the novel," writes Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel,* "Dickens paints a grim picture of both countries. They both had kings who believed in their divine right to rule. English spirituality had deteriorated into communing with spirits and other superstitious practices.... France, he says, was less given over to such spiritual revelations, but had instead a clergy that inflicted cruel punishments for minor offenses." In England minor legal offenses were often punished with hanging. At the end of the novel, Dickens contrasts the two countries in the persons of Frenchwoman Madame Defarge and Englishwoman Miss Pross; in the struggle, however, he portrays not the triumph of one country over another, but the triumph of love over hatred.

Antithesis

One of the most notable devices that Dickens uses in *A Tale of Two Cities* is the contrast of thesis and antithesis. The opening words of the novel introduce this conflict. Most of the major themes of the novel are summed up in these lines: "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." Characters mirror and oppose each other. For example, Madame Defarge's experiences mirror those of Dr. Manette. Defarge's sister is raped and her brother is murdered by the Marquis St. Evremonde; Manette witnesses the crime and is imprisoned by the aristocratic criminal. Ernest Defarge and Mr. Lorry mirror each other; they both regard themselves as businessmen and they both care for Dr. Manette. However, while Defarge becomes consumed by hate and will eventually die under the guillotine, Mr. Lorry is redeemed by his love for the Darnays and escapes France in their company. These conflicts, which Dickens pursues throughout the novel, are resolved by Sydney Carton's sacrifice for love of Lucie. He concludes with a positive statement of goodness: "It is a 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."

Doppelganger

The device of the *doppelganger,* or identical double, is central to *A Tale of Two Cities.* Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton are physically nearly identical, and some critics suggest that they are psychologically two sides of the same psyche. When Darnay is accused of spying and placed on trial in England, his lawyer, C. J. Stryver, secures his release. Stryver discredits the prosecution witness, who upon seeing Carton can no longer swear that Darnay was the man he saw spying. The climax of the novel, in which Carton takes Darnay's place on the execution grounds, is dependent on their close physical resemblance. The fact that both Carton and Darnay are in love with the same woman—Lucie

Manett—echoes the physical resemblance between the two. In other ways, however, the two are opposed. Darnay, for instance, is consumed with the need to undo the evils that his uncle, the Marquis St. Evremonde, has inflicted on people. He makes his nearly-fatal trip to Paris in order to try to rescue Gabelle, a former family servant, but he is unsuccessful; he is caught, imprisoned, and sentenced to be executed. On the other hand Carton, who reveals to Lucie that he has previously lived a life of idleness, is successful in his bid to release Darnay from prison. Ironically Darnay, who has lived an upright, moral life, is successful only as a passive figure in his marriage. Carton, who has lived an immoral life of drunkenness and idleness, is successful in his activity, although the price of his success is his life.

Historical Context

Although *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place in a time some seventy years before Dickens was writing the novel, it does indirectly address contemporary issues with which the author was concerned. During the 1780s—the period in which the novel was set—England was a relatively peaceful and prosperous nation. Its national identity was caught up in a long war with France, which the French Revolution first interrupted, then continued. The ideals of the French Revolution were imported to England by political and literary radicals such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Many people, especially the English aristocracy and middle classes, feared these revolutionary values, seeing in them a threat to their prosperous and stable way of life. However, although there were social inequities in England as well as in France, England also had a long tradition of peaceful social change. In addition, the country's political leaders were very successful at uniting all classes of society in the struggle against Revolutionary France and its successor, the Empire under Napoleon Bonaparte.

Despite these successes, fears of revolutionary rhetoric and struggle persisted in England down to Dickens's own day. Other changes also embraced the country; the Industrial Revolution created a new wealthy class and brought a previously unknown prosperity to England. That same industrialization, however, also created an underclass of laborers who relied on regular wages to survive. "Overcrowding, disease, hunger, long hours of work, and

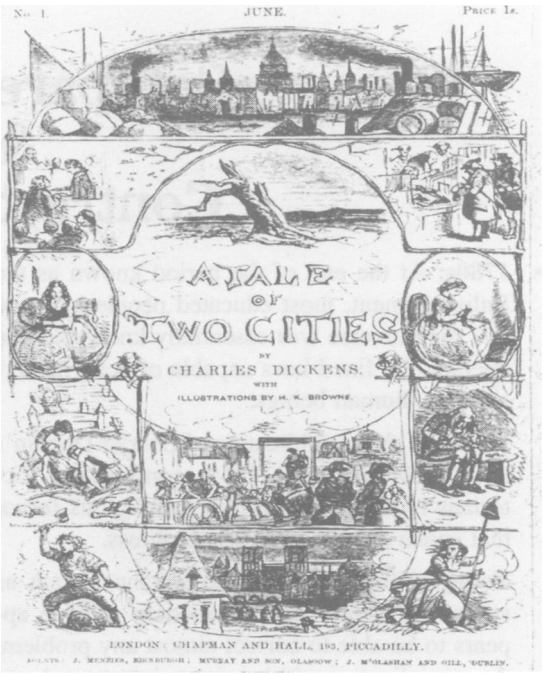


Illustration by H. K. Browne, from Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities, *published by Chapman and Hall, 1859.*

mindless, repetitive labor," explains Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel,* "characterized the new life for this new class of urban poor." This underclass was largely scorned or ignored by society. It had no rights, it could not vote in elections, and it could not legally form unions for its own protection. In addition, Glancy states, "many members of the upper classes feared even educating the poor, in case they would then become politically aware and eager to better themselves when it suited many people to have them as cheap labor." The English tradition of peaceful protest, expressed by public marches and meetings, continued throughout the early nineteenth century, but it was interrupted as the century progressed by riots and the destruction of property. "People feared that a revolution as horrifying as the French one could after all happen in England," Glancy declares. "A few political thinkers believed that such a revolution was actually the answer to Britain's problems, but most people, like Dickens, feared the actions of the mob, having seen the bloody outcome of the 1789 revolution."

The revolution that Dickens and many others feared in 1850s England did not arrive, in part be-

Compare & Contrast

- **1780s:** At the end of the period known as the Enlightenment, most educated people believed that the universe was essentially knowable and operated by fixed laws capable of being understood by human beings.

  1850s: With the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), conservative Victorians launched a backlash of religious fervor that spoke against scientific progress.

  Today: With technological advances such as space travel and cloning, modern science appears to be able to correct almost any problem. As specialization within science increases, however, few people can know very much about a variety of sciences.

- **1780s:** French thinkers and *philosophes* such as the Marquis de Montesquieu recommended an enlightened system of government with powers balanced and divided among different bodies.

  1850s: After decades of political stagnation, England began to liberalize its franchise by extending the right to vote to all male citizens regardless of how little property they might own.

  Today: With the collapse of Communist governments worldwide, the democratic model established by the United States—on which the French Revolution was based—has become the model for most national governments.

- **1780s:** The science of anatomy was in such a primitive state that new bones were still being discovered in the human body. The German Romantic poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe discovered one, later known as the intermaxillary bone, in 1784.

  1850s: By this time in England, Jerry Cruncher's trade of body-snatching had been extinct for over twenty years, thanks to Parliament's Anatomy Act (1832).

  Today: Modern medical science can replace portions of human anatomy with artificially-made bones, or through transplant surgery substitute animal organs for human ones that fail. Because of the success of transplants, a need for human organs has resurrected the trade of body-snatcher.

- **1780s:** English sailors on board H.M.S. *Bounty* mutinied in the South Pacific when their captain Bligh cut their water ration in order to water his cargo of breadfruit trees. The sailors concealed themselves on Pitcairn Island and remained undiscovered for years.

  1850s: Seafaring European explorers had identified most land masses and other Europeans were beginning to press into the continental interiors of Australia, North America, and Africa.

  Today: Modern satellite technology can map the entire world within the space of a few days. Very few corners of the earth are still unknown to Europeans or their cultural descendants, the North Americans.

- **1780s:** During the French Revolution, drinking was commonplace among all classes of society.

  1850s: A "temperance movement" centered in Protestant countries (mostly English commonwealth and the United States) vilified alcohol consumption and tried to eliminate drinking on moral grounds.

cause of the efforts of various reform parties. Although groups such as the Chartist movement had struggled for better conditions for English workers as early as the 1830s, by the 1850s many of the reforms they had sought were still not in place. The 1832 Reform Bill, introduced by Lord John Russell, had smoothed out some of the inequities in the parliamentary system, but it still left thousands of working poor disenfranchised and discontented. It was not until 1867 that Benjamin Disraeli introduced a Reform Bill that nearly doubled the number of voters throughout England, Wales, and Scot-

land. This reform, passed late in Dickens's life, helped smother the fears of bloody revolution that dogged the English upper and middle classes. "There was no bloody revolution," explains Glancy, "but Dickens and others deplored the snail's pace that the government took to achieve peaceful reform through the parliamentary process. If the time of the Revolution in France was 'the epoch of belief ... the epoch of incredulity,'" she concludes, "so too were the 1850s in Britain."

Critical Overview

A Tale of Two Cities is perhaps the least characteristic of Charles Dickens's works. Unlike both his earlier and his later novels, which are largely concerned with events within the Victorian society in which he lived, *A Tale of Two Cities* is set during a period some seventy years earlier. It shows both France and England in an unflattering light. Perhaps because the novel is so uncharacteristic of the author, it remains among the author's most popular works with readers who do not generally enjoy Dickens. On the other hand, it is often rated the least popular Dickens novel among Dickens fans.

While *A Tale of Two Cities* was immensely popular with the reading public on its original serialization in 1859, its critical reception was mixed. "One feature that appears from the outset," explains Norman Page in his essay "Dickens and His Critics," "is a polarisation of responses, the novel being found either superlatively good or superlatively bad." According to Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel,* most contemporary critics routinely dismissed the type of popular literature that Dickens wrote as being unworthy of ranking as art. The most famous and the most caustic of the early critics of *A Tale of Two Cities* was Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, who wrote a very harsh review of the book in the December 17, 1859, issue of *Saturday Review.* "After condemning the plot—'it would perhaps be hard to imagine a clumsier or more disjointed framework for the display of the tawdry wares which form Mr. Dickens's stock in trade'—Stephen dismissed *A Tale of Two Cities* as a purely mechanical effort, producing grotesqueness and pathos through formula writing and trickery," explains Glancy. "He objected particularly to the 'grotesqueness' of the speech of the French characters, whose French-sounding English he considered 'misbegotten jargon' that 'shows a great want of sensibility to the real requirements of art.'" "It has been suggested," continues Page, "that ... Stephen was motivated more by political than by literary considerations, and it is true that one line of his attack is directed at Dickens's disparagement of eighteenth-century England in relation to the present, and his hostile portrayal of the French aristocracy of the same period."

Stephen's attack, politically motivated or not, sums up most of the criticisms that later scholars have levelled at the novel: (1) as history, it is flawed; (2) it is mechanical and unrealistic in its construction; and (3) it is very uncharacteristic of Dickens. Many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics, including the important Dickens scholar George Gissing and Dickens's fellow-journalist and novelist G. K. Chesterton, followed Stephen's lead in criticizing the novel. According to Page's essay, Chesterton objects to Dickens's portrayal of the Revolution as an elemental act of emotion rather than recognizing the importance of intellectual ideas. Page also reveals that in Gissing's review of the novel, construction has "ceased to be a virtue and has become a constraining and excluding factor." After Dickens's death in 1871, writes Page, "the novelist Margaret Oliphant dismissed it as unworthy of Dickens and suggested that it 'might have been written by any new author, so little of Dickens there is in it.'" Other critics considered its characters and its staging unrealistic and objected to its lack of humor.

Stephen's opinion, although influential, was not universally accepted. Favorable reviews of *A Tale of Two Cities* appeared in London newspapers, including the *Daily News,* the *Daily Telegraph,* the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Star,* throughout the month of December, 1859. Many of Dickens's own literary friends, acquaintances, and contemporaries, including John Forster, Thomas Carlyle, Wilkie Collins, and Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) also praised the novel. Modern critics also largely praise the novel, concentrating on its psychological portraits and its status as historical fiction. Glancy reports that the work "has achieved new status and new serious study," and concludes that "its continuing presence on school reading lists and in films and plays ... attests to its lasting popularity ... with the many readers who find in *A Tale of Two Cities* the full range of Dickens's dramatic and narrative power."

Criticism

George V. Griffith

Griffith is a professor of English and philosophy at Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska. In the following excerpt, he discusses Dickens's obsession with duality in the book and the parallels implied between the era of the French Revolution and the author's own time.

In a preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens described how the idea for the novel came to him when he was playing a role in 1857 in a theatrical production of *The Frozen Deep,* a play written by his friend Wilkie Collins. In the play a man involved in a love triangle sacrifices his life to save the rival suitor of the woman he loves. Dickens's account of the origins of the novel points to Sydney Carton as the central character of *A Tale of Two Cities,* although other evidence suggests that other ideas might have played as large a role in the birth of the book. In notebooks as early as 1855 there appear references to the fate of people released after long imprisonment and to the phrase "Buried Alive," which was for a time Dickens's working title for *A Tale of Two Cities.* "Recalled to Life" became his title for Part I of the novel. This evidence places Dr. Manette's imprisonment center stage. An argument for either character as focal misses Dickens's craft in bringing those two characters—and others—together in the theme of resurrection and renewal, life, death and rebirth in this story of the French Revolution.

The secrecy shadowing the opening chapter, best expressed in the cryptic message "Recalled to Life," attends the effort to retrieve Dr. Manette from the French prison where he has been "buried" for eighteen years. Three times Dickens repeats the following exchange:

> "Buried how long?"
>
> "Almost eighteen years."
>
> "I hope you care to live."
>
> "I can't say."

Dr. Manette, a man figuratively returned from the grave and given life again, is the first of many characters in the novel whose life story is the story of death and rebirth. Charles Darnay, on trial for his life at the book's opening, is acquitted; then in France, not once but twice, he is retried, each time to be rescued from a near certain death by guillotine. He is rescued first by Carton, then by Dr. Manette, then again by Carton, who speaks the words of the Anglican funeral service, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Carton himself is figuratively brought to life by his heroic role in the novel. In his first appearance, at Darnay's trial, Carton is the Jackal to Stryver's Lion, a man whose promise has ended in a dissolute alcoholism and idleness. When he describes himself to Lucie as a "self-flung away, wasted, drunken, poor creature of misuse," she asks: "Can I not recall you ... to a better course?" Indeed she does. In his self-sacrificing devotion to Lucie he finds redemption, giving his life that Darnay might live, the savior saved.

Dickens extends the "Recalled to Life" theme to the secondary characters, sometimes in comic ways. Jerry Cruncher, for example, is a "Resurrection Man," the term given to those who robbed the graves of the freshly buried to keep the anatomy schools supplied with corpses. Cruncher's efforts to retrieve the body of Roger Cly following his burial are stymied when he discovers an empty casket. Cly's death and burial as an Old Bailey spy, complete with an enraged London mob, is a fraud, a means of his escaping England with John Barsad. Cly, too, then, is "buried" and resurrected. The aristocrat Foulon tries the same trick in Paris, but the enraged French mob will not be fooled. "Resurrected" from a staged death, he is then killed, his mouth stuffed with grass in fitting vengeance for his once having told the hungry peasantry to eat grass.

The larger canvas on which Dickens works is the story of the two cities of the title, the historical account of the French Revolution about which Dickens also thinks in terms of death and renewal, for the Revolution is the death of the *ancien regime* and the birth of the Republic, the bloody and fiery renewal of France. In the same preface in which he spoke of the genesis of the novel in his participation in Collins's play, Dickens also expressed his gratitude to Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, whose *The French Revolution* (1837) Dickens once claimed in a letter to have read "for the 500th time." From Carlyle, Dickens took both numerous specific details about the Revolution and a more general view of history. Carlyle viewed history as a grand succession of eras, often in cycles of destruction and reconstitution. In history there was always a revelation of a divine moral order at work in the world. The French Revolution, the single most significant recent event in the lives of those like Carlyle and Dickens who were born in the Napoleonic aftermath, offered abundant lessons regarding the presence of the past. Horrified by the Terror of

1793, the English read the lesson that corruption breeds corruption, that extremes are followed by extremes. The earlier generation of English writers, typified by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, were stirred by the ambitious idealism of the Revolution. To Dickens, by contrast, although he evoked sentimental ideals in Carton's sacrifice to save the life of a rival lover, there was nothing romantic or idealizing about what death was necessary to recall to life a nation.

The avenging revolutionaries are as dreadful as those whom they overthrow. Dickens allots a single chapter to recounting the rape of the young peasant girl, Madame Defarge's sister, at Darnay's second trial when Defarge reads from the account of the affair which Dr. Manette had written in 1857. Only three chapters sketch the proud indifference to the suffering of the peasantry of Monseigneur St. Evremonde, Darnay's uncle, leading to his murder. The remaining French chapters unroll in all their gruesome predictability the equally barbarous French mobs of the Revolution. In other words, Dickens is more horrified by the sins of the Revolutionaries than by the sins of the aristocrats which give birth to revolution. Except for the Defarges, who are given names and more singular identities, the Revolutionaries are seen collectively, all of them named "Jacques." St. Antoine, a place name for a Paris suburb, is personified, given a collective identity. In the Carmagnole, the frenzied dance in the Paris streets which follows Darnay's acquittal in his first French trial, all identities merge into one destructive force. Finally, characters have identities not as persons but as awful functions in the Revolution, as in the case of Vengeance, who accompanies the Defarges.

With death and life so closely linked in the renewal theme, Dickens found a strategy for his presentation. He presents, beginning with the title, complementary and contradictory pairs of places, characters, events, and ideas. London and Paris, the former apparently a safe haven, the latter a hell, are more similar than they seem. Darnay is tried in both cities. The mob at Cly's "burial" is as frenzied as the ones in Paris. At the Manettes' apartment in Soho, a thunderstorm disrupts an outdoor Sunday dinner, driving the Manettes inside for safety while people hurry in the streets, their footsteps "the footsteps destined to come to all of us."

Characters are doubles of each other. Carton resembles Darnay, in the beginning physically but not morally, in the end reversed. Darnay himself, having renounced his birthright, is a ghost of the Evremondes. Darnay's father and uncle are twins, indistinguishable in their awful pride. Dr. Manette has two selves, the imprisoned man who flees the horror of his imprisonment by reducing his life to work on a shoe bench, and the rescued man who several times regresses to his former self.

Even Dickens's style reflects his obsession with duality. The famous opening passage almost traps Dickens, like a repeated melody which he cannot stop:

> 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, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to

What Do I Read Next?

- Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989) is a modern account of the people and events of the French Revolution that show how the rational goals of the Revolution mix with irrational elements of the same period.
- *The Pickwick Papers* (first serialized 1836-1837), Charles Dickens's tremendously popular first novel, concentrates on the relationship between middle-class Mr. Pickwick and his lively Cockney servant Sam Weller.
- *A Christmas Carol, in Prose: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (1843) is Dickens's perennially popular story about how the spirits of Christmas turn an old miser's outlook back to humanity.
- Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) is the story of a young man's slow advancement in society against the backdrop of mid-Victorian England.
- *War and Peace* (1866) is Leo Tolstoy's study of Russian society during the period of the Napoleonic Wars and the French invasion of Russia.

> Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

The key note struck is contradiction, but the passage also points to the similarity between the age of the French Revolution and Dickens's own. His story insists that all ages are one in the call of duty and the threat to civility and virtue. His most virtuous characters in the book—Lucie, Darnay, Carton, Manette, Lorry—are self-sacrificing, but, unlike the Revolutionaries, who insist on self-sacrifice for the sake of Revolution, Dickens's virtuous ones give of themselves for another individual. For Dickens the grand sweep of historical events is still dwarfed by the power of personal relationships in which life, death, and renewal are less ambiguous, as the Revolution disappears before Carton's final words: "It is a far, far better thing I do than any I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than any I have ever known." Dickens's apparent solution to the problem of a world so troubled that it spawns vengeful revolution is a call to a moral renewal in our personal relationships which would make such revolutions unnecessary.

Source: George V. Griffith, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Leonard Manheim

In the following excerpt, Manheim uses Lucy and Dr. Manette as examples of roles female and male characters play in A Tale of Two Cities.

came to him. The bracelet he sent to Ellen Lawless Ternan had fallen into the hands of his wife Kate; and he was determined to end his marriage and to seduce Ellen. But he was in the midst of the rehearsals which had finally brought himself and Ellen together; and he could not pause to think. Amid Kate's tears, Forster's disapproval and a generally unnerving situation, he carried on in his furious possessed fashion, determined to have his own way and yet to keep his hold on the public; and in the midst of this spiritually and physically racked condition, as he was holding back his agony of mind by acting and producing *The Frozen Deep,* the central idea of the novel burst upon him.

So much we know from his own statement. It is clear then that we should be able to find the imprint of his ordeal, his tormented choice, in the novel. One would expect writers on his work to concentrate on this problem; but so abysmally low is the standard of Dickens criticism that no one has even seriously raised the question at all.

Where then is the imprint of the situation to be traced? By solving this point we can begin to understand what the novel itself is about, and the part it plays in Dickens' development. One general aspect of the selection of theme is at once obvious. The deep nature of the breach he is making with all customary acceptances is driving him to make a comprehensive effort to grasp history in a new way. So far (except for *Barnaby Rudge*) he has been content to use certain symbols to define his sense of basic historical conflict and movement. Yet all the while the influence of Carlyle, both in his *French Revolution* and his prophetic works like *Past and Present,* has been stirring him with the need for a direct statement of the historical issue as well as a symbolic one; and now, as he is coming close to a full confrontation of his opposition to all ruling Victorian values, he feels the need to set his story of conflicting wills in a manifestly revolutionary situation: that on which he had so long pondered as holding the clue to the crisis of his own world.

He had read and re-read Carlyle's history, till its theme and material were richly present in his mind; and now he wrote to the master asking for a loan of the cited authorities. The story goes that Carlyle jokingly sent him all his reference-books, 'about two cartloads.' And in the novel's preface Dickens wrote:

> It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that

Source: Leonard Manheim, "A Tale of Two Characters: A Study in Multiple Projection," in *Dickens Studies Annual,* 1970, pp. 225-37.

Jack Lindsay

In the following excerpt, Lindsay shows how events in Dickens' personal life strongly influenced the plot and characters of A Tale of Two Cities.

Charles Dickens was in a driven demoniac state of mind when the idea for *A Tale of Two Cities*

terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book.

But though this need to make a general reconsideration of the nature of historical movement and change was certainly central in the impulse that Dickens felt, he had to fuse the overt theme with a more immediately personal nexus of emotion and imagery before it could take full grip of him. In the midst of his domestic misery and frenzied play-acting he did not feel simply an intellectual need to revalue history. The desire to break through obstructions and to mate with Ellen could turn into the desire to write about the French Revolution only if some image or symbol made him feel a basic coincidence between his own experience and the Revolution. What then was this image?

It was that of the Imprisoned Man in the Bastille. The Lost Man who has been jailed so long that he has become an automaton of oppressed misery; who has forgotten even the source of his wrong, the cause of his dehumanizing misery; who needs to break out of the deadly darkness of stone in order to become human again, to learn the truth and regain love.

Here then is the core of the novel. The originally-intended title was *Recalled to Life.* Though Dickens dropped this for the whole novel, he kept it for the first part, and it expressed the originating emotion of the story. *A Tale of Two Cities* is built up from the episode of Dr. Manette's unjust imprisonment; and its whole working-out is concerned with the effects of that unjust deprivation of light and joy: effects which entangle everyone round the Doctor and recoil back on his own head in unpredictable ways. The Doctor's fate is thus for Dickens both a symbol of the Revolution, its deeds, causes, and consequences, and of himself, immured in a maddening cell of lies and cruelties, and seeking to break through into the truth, into a full and happy relationship with his fellows. It was the demented sense of environing pressures, of an unjust inescapable mechanism, which caught Dickens up in the midst of his wild mummery and gave him a sense of release when he determined to write the novel.

It has been pointed out (by T. A. Jackson) that there is a close underlying similarity between the plot of *A Tale* and that of *Little Dorrit* (the preceding novel in which Dickens had at last fully marshalled his condemnation of Victorian society). Both Dorrit and Manette are imprisoned for a score of years; both are released by forces outside their control and then continue tormented by their jail-experience. Dorrit is haunted by fear of social exposure, which comes finally in the collapse of Merdle (the exposure of the theft basic in the economic system). Dorrit thus from one angle embodies Dickens's deep fears of the past, fears of being exposed, fears of being driven back on the terrible moment of loss which therefore threatens to return in exacerbated form. He also embodies the bad conscience of a whole society which dares not contemplate truly its origins. But in Manette the symbolism goes much deeper. The experience of oppressive misery has not merely twisted him, as it twisted Dorrit; it has broken down the whole system of memory in his psyche. The problem then is: What can restore consciousness? what can connect the upper and the hidden levels of the mind again? Manette is kept going by a blind exercise of the craft learned in the cell of oppression, and only the intrusion of events from the Revolution can bring him back to an active consciousness and release him from his obsession. But the drama of objectifying in action the pattern of memory, the repetition-compulsion which must be broken, inevitably brings its shocks, its apparent evocation of forces as destructive as those working from the traumatic level. The test lies in the way that evocation is faced, the way it works out. So Manette finds that the bitterness engendered by his sufferings as an innocent wronged man has tangled him up in a net (inside a larger reference of social action and reaction, guilt and innocence) from which escape is possible only after a great sacrifice has been made. The old must die for the new to be born; man cannot attain regeneration without accepting its sacrificial aspect. In the story this appears in the struggle between Darnay and Carton for Manette's daughter, and the solution that mates Darnay and the girl, yet sends Carton to a regeneration in death.

In this dire tangle of moral consequences we see Dickens confronting his own confused situation and trying to equate his own moment of painful compelled choice with the revolutionary moment in which a definite break is made with the old, amid violent birthpangs, and makes possible the rebirth of life, the renewal of love and innocence.

The lacerated and divided state of Dickens's emotions at this moment of choice is revealed by the device of having two heroes who are practically twins in appearance and who love the same girl. Both Carton and Darnay are generous fellows, but one is morally well-organized, the other is fecklessly a misfit. The latter, however, by his devoted death reaches the same level of heroic generosity as his rival; indeed goes higher. His gesture of re-

nunciation completes the ravages of the Revolution with its ruthless justice, and transforms them into acts of purification and redemption, without which the life of renewed love would not be possible.

Thus, in the story, Dickens gets the satisfaction of nobly giving up the girl and yet mating with her. He splits himself in the moment of choice, dies, and yet lives to marry the beloved, from whom the curse born out of a tainted and divided society is at last removed. And at the same time he is Manette, the man breaking out of a long prison-misery, who seeks only truth and justice, and whose submerged memory-drama projects itself as both the Carton-Darnay conflict and the socially-impinging dilemma that disrupts and yet solves that conflict.

There are thus a number of ambivalences in the story; and Dickens shows himself divided in his attitude to the Revolution itself. His petty-bourgeois fear of mass-movements is still alive; but the fascination of such movements, which stirred so strongly in *Barnaby,* is even keener than the fear. On the one hand he clings to the moral thesis to defend the Revolution: the Old Regime was vilely cruel and bestialized people, it could not but provoke excesses in return as the bonds slipped. But this thesis, to which Carlyle had sought to give a grandiose religious tang, now merges for Dickens with a deeper acceptance:

> Crush humanity out of shape once more under similar hammers and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.
>
> Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilets of flaring Jezebels, the churches that are not my Father's house but dens of thieves, the huts of millions of starving peasants.

This passage begins with the simple moral statement; but the tumbrils, conjured up as mere counterpoises to the feudal carriages, become emblems of a great purification sweeping away the reign of the old iniquity. They express a ruthless *transformation* of society and are far more than an allegory of cruel tit-for-tat. Rather, they appear as forces of triumphant righteousness.

Throughout the book there runs this ambivalent attitude to the Revolution, shuddering, yet inclining to a deep and thorough acceptance. Not a blank-cheque acceptance, but one based on the subtle dialectics of conflict revealed by the story of Manette. For that story, symbolizing the whole crisis and defining its tensions in the depths of the spirit, makes a serious effort to work out the process of change, the rhythms of give-and-take, the involved struggles with their many inversions and opposed refractions, the ultimate resolution in death and love, in the renewal of life.

The working-out of the clash of forces is in fact more thoroughly done than in any previous work of Dickens. The weakness lies in the comparative thinness of characterization. The strain of grasping and holding intact the complex skein of the story is too much for Dickens at this difficult moment of growth. But his instinct is, as always, right. He needed this strenuous effort to get outside himself: no other way could he master the difficult moment and rebuild his foundations. After it he could return to the attack on the contemporary world with a new sureness, with new thews of drama, with new breadths of comprehension. The great works, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend,* were made possible. (I am not here dealing with those works; but it is interesting to note that the imprisonment-theme finds its completion in the contrasted and entangled themes of Miss Havisham and the old convict, the self-imposed prison of the traumatic moment and the socially-imposed prison of the criminal impulse, both merging to express the compulsions of an acquisitive society.)

A Tale is not a successful work like the two novels that followed it, but they would never have been written without it. An inner strain appears in the rigidity of tension between the thematic structure and the release of character-fantasy. Such persons as Manette, however, show a new persistence of psychological analysis, and the Defarges show what untapped sources of dramatic force Dickens could yet draw on. The final falsification of the book's meaning came about through the melodrama based on its material, in which the emphasis put on Carton sentimentalized away all the profundities.

Lucie is meant to represent Ellen Ternan; but at this stage Dickens knows very little about the real Ellen, and Lucie is therefore a stock-heroine. Charles Darnay, the winning lover, has the revealing initials *Charles D.* Dickens with his love of name-meanings can seldom resist leaving at least one or two such daydream-admissions among the names of a novel. Ellen was acting as Lucy in *The Frozen Deep* at the time when the novel's idea came.

Source: Jack Lindsay, "*A Tale of Two Cities,*" in *Life and Letters,* September, 1949, pp. 191-204.

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