

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

by Charles Dickens



THE AUTHOR

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the second of eight children in a family plagued by debt. When he was twelve, his father was thrown into debtors' prison, and Charles was forced to quit school and work in a shoe-dye factory. These early experiences gave him a sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, along with an acute sense of social justice. At the age of fifteen, he became a clerk in a law firm, and later worked as a newspaper reporter. He published his first fiction in 1836 - a series of character sketches called *Sketches by Boz*. The work was well-received, but its reception was nothing compared to the international acclaim he received with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in the following year.

After this early blush of success, Dickens took on the job as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a literary magazine in which a number of his early works were serialized, including *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). He left to begin his own literary magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in 1840, and over the next ten years published many of his most famous novels in serial form, including *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *A Christmas Carol* (1844), and *David Copperfield* (1849-50), perhaps the most autobiographical of all his novels. Other works were serialized in *Household Words* between 1850 and 1859, which was then succeeded by *All the Year Round*, which he edited until his death in 1870, publishing such novels as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). A workaholic to the end, Dickens died of a stroke in 1870 after having penned a chapter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, his final (and unfinished) novel, the previous day.

As far as his personal life was concerned, Dickens was a tireless writer and speaker, but his own personal insecurities made him very difficult to live with. He married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and, though they had ten children together, their relationship grew increasingly strained until they finally divorced in 1859. He traveled extensively, including making several trips to America (he never much liked the country or its people), and was frequently called upon to read from his own writings, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds. Dickens also spoke out on a variety of social issues, including American slavery and the lack of copyright laws that made it far too easy for unscrupulous people to steal his writings, as well as the abuses of industrial society that play such a prominent role in his novels.

PLOT SUMMARY

As the story begins, Jarvis Lorry, an elderly banker, is on his way to meet Lucie Manette, a ward of the bank who thinks her father is dead, to tell her that her father has been discovered alive in the Bastille, where he has been unjustly imprisoned for eighteen years. Lorry accompanies Lucie to Paris, where they are led to Doctor Manette by Monsieur Defarge, a wine-shop owner and former servant of the doctor. They find him bereft of his faculties because of his long imprisonment; Lucie alone is able to elicit a response from him. They then arrange to take him back to London with them.

When the story returns to London, Charles Darnay is on trial for his life, accused of treason for having allegedly passed British military secrets to the Americans during the American Revolution. The trial is completely unfair, with the jury hearing testimony from clearly unreliable witnesses and shouting down pleas from the defense. Darnay's lawyer, Mr. Stryver, is assisted by a drunken underachiever named Sydney Carton. It is the latter's striking resemblance to Darnay that turns the course of the trial, since the witnesses against Darnay are forced to admit that they could not positively identify Darnay as the spy against whom they are speaking. Darnay is acquitted as a result.

Meanwhile, Doctor Manette is recovering under the tender hand of his daughter, and Lucie is attracting potential suitors, including Stryver, Carton, and Darnay. The scene then switches to Paris, where an unnamed marquis (later identified as the Marquis de St. Evremonde) runs down a little peasant girl with his coach. Her father climbs under his coach as he travels home, then murders him in his bed. Before the murder, Darnay, who is the nephew of the marquis, visits the estate and announces his intention to renounce his title and property because of the bloodshed and oppression it represents.

When the story returns to London, Darnay is preparing to propose marriage to Lucie. Her father agrees if Lucie is willing, but insists that Darnay not reveal his true identity until the morning of the wedding. Stryver, who had also intended to propose marriage, laughs it off philosophically, claiming that such a match would have had no financial benefit, but Carton visits Lucie, congratulates her, expresses his own sense of unworthiness, and promises her his undying devotion. Later, Darnay and Lucie marry, though Darnay's revelation of his real name to Doctor Manette sends the doctor into a relapse that lasts throughout the couple's honeymoon. They are very happy, and have a daughter, little Lucie, and a son, who is stillborn. Sydney Carton becomes a regular guest in their home, and is particularly attached to little Lucie.

By this time it is 1789, and Dickens shifts the narrative to an account of the storming of the Bastille, in which the Defarges are involved. In the process of taking the old prison, Defarge finds the cell in which Doctor Manette had been imprisoned, and discovers a hand-written account of his trials and sufferings, which at the same time names his persecutor, the late Marquis de St. Evremonde. Revolution has now come in earnest to Paris. Shortly thereafter, Darnay receives a letter from Gabelle, a servant of the old marquis, who has been arrested for aiding the aristocracy. He pleads with Darnay to come to France and speak on his behalf. Darnay determines to go, but does so without telling his family. Meanwhile, Lorry has been summoned to Paris to bring order out of chaos at Tellson's French office; he takes Jerry Cruncher with him to serve as his bodyguard.

When Darnay arrives in Paris, he is immediately imprisoned in La Force, a prison where many aristocrats were held during the Revolution while awaiting execution. Doctor Manette and Lucie arrive shortly thereafter, seeking some way of assisting Darnay. Doctor Manette soon discovers that his experience in the Bastille gives him influence with the mob, which he uses to protect Darnay for the fifteen months that follow, during which Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette are guillotined, along with many others. During this time, Lucie stands each day outside the walls of the prison, hoping that her husband can see her and will be encouraged by the sight.

After fifteen months, Doctor Manette informs Lucie that Darnay is to be brought to trial the following day, but that he has the means to assure that the trial will go in his favor. At the trial, the mob is unruly and bloodthirsty. There is no thought of justice, only vengeance. But Doctor Manette plans the questions that will be asked at the trial, and in the process brings out Darnay's renunciation of his lands and title, his sympathy for the peasants, his relationship to the former Bastille prisoner now considered a hero, and the earlier accusation lodged against him in England of having been a friend of the United States. On the basis of this evidence, Darnay is acquitted and carried from the hall on the shoulders of the now-jubilant mob.

The next day, however, Darnay is arrested again on the basis of a new charge that has been leveled against him - the long-hidden account of Doctor Manette's arrest found by Defarge in the Bastille. Meanwhile, Sydney Carton has arrived in Paris, unknown to the others. He encounters John Barsad, the spy who had originally accused Darnay in the trial in England, who has now become a spy for the Revolution; he is also Miss Pross' long-lost brother Solomon. Carton threatens to reveal Barsad's true identity if he does not help him carry out the plans he has made - to substitute himself for Darnay if the new trial does not go well. Carton then goes to a pharmacist's shop and purchases a powerful drug needed to carry out his plan.

Darnay's trial, indeed, does not go well. The centerpiece of the new accusation against him is the paper written in Doctor Manette's own hand, which denounces the family of St. Evremonde and all its issue. Darnay is condemned to death on the basis of this evidence, and is led back to prison. Carton prepares to carry out his plan, and in the process becomes aware that Madame Defarge is plotting the deaths of Doctor Manette, Lucie, and the little girl as well. He then arranges with Lorry to get them all out of the city the next day. That night, Carton visits Darnay in his cell with the help of John Barsad. He tricks Darnay into exchanging clothes with him, then drugs him. Barsad carries Darnay out of the cell and places him, unconscious, in the carriage from Tellson's. The next day, Carton goes to the guillotine in Darnay's place, comforting a young seamstress in the cart, while the reunited family escapes to freedom in England. Meanwhile, Madame Defarge goes to the apartment where Lucie had been staying to try to catch her in the act of mourning for a dead prisoner, which will strengthen the case against her. She encounters only Miss Pross, however, who has been left behind to close down the apartment. The two fight, and Madame Defarge is killed when the pistol with which she tries to kill Pross goes off. Carton dies in Darnay's place, but his name lives on in their child, who is named after him and rises to an illustrious place in society, and in the loving memories of all those who benefitted from his sacrifice.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Jarvis Lorry - An elderly businessman and employee of Tellson's Bank, he is a close friend of the Manettes and Charles Darnay, and has good connections in France because his bank does business there.
- Doctor Manette - A brilliant physician who was imprisoned in the Bastille for eighteen years after treating a woman raped by the Marquis de St. Evremonde, his mind is deeply scarred by his experience in prison. After his release, he regains his faculties and is a good father to his daughter Lucie. He attempts to use his influence with the Paris mob to secure the release of Charles (who is in reality the nephew of the Marquis who imprisoned him), but to no avail.
- Lucie Manette - Raised in England as a ward of Tellson's Bank after her parents were assumed to be dead, she is reunited with her father upon his release from prison. Shortly thereafter, she falls in love with and marries Charles Darnay, unaware of his aristocratic ties in France.
- Charles Darnay - The surviving Marquis de St. Evremonde, he renounces his title and his property in favor of the peasants who have been abused by his uncle and the other nobles before him. He moves to England, where he becomes a tutor, and falls in love with and marries Lucie. He returns to France when one of the servants from the old estate is unjustly imprisoned and seeks his help. He is arrested as an emigre, and sentenced to death by the revolutionary tribunal.
- Sydney Carton - A talented but lazy, drunken lawyer, he also falls in love with Lucie, but knows he is unworthy of her. His remarkable resemblance to Charles Darnay gives him the idea that will produce his redemption after a wasted life, while at the same time giving joy to the woman he loves. When he changes places with Darnay in the French prison and goes to the guillotine in his place, he becomes the novel's hero.
- Jerry Cruncher - An odd-job man for Tellson's Bank, he serves as comic relief in the novel, but also shows himself fiercely protective of Jarvis Lorry and his friends when the climax approaches in the dangerous streets of Paris.
- Miss Pross - Lucie's nurse and companion, she is tough, but with a heart of gold. Her toughness enables her to win the climactic battle against the evil Madame Defarge.
- Monsieur Defarge - A wine shop owner and head of revolutionary activity in the St. Antoine sector of Paris, he was previously a servant to Doctor Manette.
- Madame Defarge - Her hatred stems from the rape and subsequent death of her sister at the hands of the Marquis de St. Evremonde. She is so full of hatred that she will not rest until she brings about the death of every aristocrat, man, woman, and child. It is her cunning that prevents Doctor Manette from saving Charles, and she eventually proves a serious threat to Lucie and her young child as well.

- John Barsad (Solomon Pross) - A professional spy and Miss Pross' long-lost brother, he testifies against Darnay at his trial in England, later reappears as a spy for the Revolution in France, and becomes the unwilling accomplice of Carton in his desperate plan to free Darnay from the guillotine.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“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 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.” (p. 1)

“I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me.” (Sydney Carton, p. 88)

“O Miss Manette, when the little picture of a happy father’s face looks up in yours, when you see your own bright beauty springing up anew at your feet, think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you!” (Sydney Carton, p. 156)

“‘Then tell wind and fire where to stop,’ returned madame; ‘but don’t tell me.’” (Madame Defarge, p. 343)

“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.” (Sydney Carton, p. 378)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* does not present an accurate historical picture of the French Revolution. Why is the historical inaccuracy of the work a matter of little significance? Would more attention to the actual events of the French Revolution have produced a better novel or a less-effective one? Why do you think so?
2. Discuss the multiple uses and meanings of the theme of resurrection as it appears in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. In what way does this theme link the disparate events of the narrative?
3. In Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, does the author show greater sympathy for the aristocrats of France or for the peasantry? Does he demonstrate the same sympathies in his treatment of the social classes of England? Use specific events from the novel to support your conclusion.

4. A *foil* is a contrasting character who helps to set off the traits of a major figure in a story. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, for instance, Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay are foils, as are Madame Defarge and Miss Pross. Choose one of these pairs and discuss how their similarities help to emphasize their differences, and how the contrast between the two serves to advance the plot and bring out the author's meaning in the novel.
5. Discuss the extent to which the knitting done by Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* serves as a metaphor for fate.
6. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, is revolution pictured more as a planned action of a small group of plotters or an act of irrational mob violence? Support your conclusion with details from the story. Do you agree with Dickens about this? Why or why not?
7. John 11:25 - "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" - plays a crucial role in the latter part of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. What role does it play in the story itself, and to what extent does it express one of the major themes of the novel?
8. Some have said that Sydney Carton is a Christ-figure in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. To what extent is this true? In what ways does Carton *not* play the role of a Christ-figure in the novel?
9. According to Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, what is necessary in order for a life to have meaning? Answer the question with particular reference to the character of Sydney Carton.
10. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Give three specific examples of foreshadowing in the novel, and show how each enhances the reader's experience and underscores one of the novel's major themes.
11. Discuss the relationship between London and Paris in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Is the novel a cautionary tale that warns that the injustices of London are not so much different from those of Paris, and that revolution could come there as well, or is it an expression of confidence in the stability of a British system that would provide a haven for those unjustly persecuted by the barbarians of France?
12. Novelists often bring life to major events of history by focusing on an individual or family and the way in which the great event affected their lives. Such is surely the case in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. How does the approach of the novelist make the French Revolution seem more real, more immediate, and thus enable the reader to enter into it more fully than could be accomplished by a mere historical narrative?
13. Discuss the famous opening sentence of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. In what sense were these paradoxes true, and how do they set the stage for the action and themes of the novel?

14. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, is Madame Defarge justified in her hatred of the aristocracy in general and the St. Evremonde family in particular? Why or why not?
15. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, he slightly alters the slogan of the French Revolution to "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity - or Death!" What is his point in doing so? Is his revision a legitimate one, or does it distort the reader's understanding of the Revolution?
16. Compare and contrast the first and last of the three trials experienced by Charles Darnay in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Were either of them fair trials? Why or why not? In what ways do these trials illustrate the main themes of the novel?
17. Discuss the famous last sentence of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Do you agree that Carton's sacrificial act was a good thing for him to do? Did he in fact redeem his wasted life through this one act of altruism?