

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Tale of Two Cities

by Charles Dickens

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ISBN 978-1-60389-942-0

Item No. 200814

A Tale of Two Cities

Notes

This historical novel, which takes place at the time of the French Revolution, presents the French Revolution as the natural or fated consequence of the social ills of the times. The growing poverty in which the masses of people lived and the oppression they suffered at the hands of the aristocracy were the proximate causes for the civil unrest that led to the French Revolution.

Keeping in mind that Dickens originally wrote the novel for a weekly publication, notice how he maintains the suspense and interest of his readers by providing cliff-hangers at the end of many chapters. Note the first and last lines in the novel, too; no other novel in English has an opening and closing as well known as the first and last lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classic edition of *A Tale of Two Cities*, copyright 2005.

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Background Information

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution began July 14, 1789, when a mob stormed the Bastille, an infamous prison that housed political prisoners sent there by members of the aristocracy. The French people celebrate Bastille Day on July 14 much as Americans celebrate the Fourth of July.

After the government's overthrow, a revolutionary committee of middle-class citizens governed Paris. During this period, the peasants burned the castles of the lords in order to destroy the papers which contained the records of their manorial rights.

In 1792, royalty was abolished, and a republic was proclaimed. In 1793, the Reign of Terror began, and thousands of aristocrats were killed by the guillotine.

The reasons for the revolution were complex but included the following:

- oppression of the masses by the aristocracy
- working conditions that were no better than slavery
- unfair taxes that put additional burden on those struggling to survive
- hunger and poverty of the masses in stark contrast to the indulgent life of the aristocracy.

CHARLES DICKENS (1812 – 1870)

Dickens, who was very popular in his own time, often read his stories to large, appreciative audiences. As with his other works, *A Tale of Two Cities* was written in weekly installments and was eagerly awaited by his audience.

Dickens was a bright child but did suffer some significant reverses while growing up. His father was sent to debtors' prison. It was during these difficult years that Dickens developed his fascination with prisons and his interest in the needs of the poor.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. describe parallelism in Dickens' style and identify examples of it in the novel.
2. discuss the extent to which this novel meets the four criteria for an historical novel.
3. relate incidents in the story which illustrate the author's views on the following:
 - capital punishment
 - the horrors of prisons
 - the dangers of mob rule
 - the ideal woman
 - horrible ways to die.
4. cite events from the novel to support that Dickens believes in fate and show that the events in the protagonist's life (Darnay's) are inevitable consequences resulting from the tide of history.
5. explain how the author uses foreshadowing to heighten suspense and create interest in the following ways:
 - using imagery to set the mood for the action to come
 - suggestively titling each chapter
 - including cliff-hangers to end many of the chapters.
6. recognize the difference between third-person and first-person narration and indicate when the point of view changes.
7. identify the author's use of personification and discuss how he employs it to touch the emotions of the reader.
8. trace the development of the major theme in this story, rebirth through sacrifice, as it applies to:
 - Dr. Manette
 - Sydney Carton
 - Charles Darnay.

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References

Carmagnole – This is a dance done to a revolutionary song and used to work the mob into a frenzy before the executions.

Continental Congress – In America, in 1775, the Continental Congress sent a list of grievances to the British government.

Guillotine – The guillotine is a supposedly painless form of execution named after Dr. Guillotin, who first proposed it.

Letres de cachet – These are referred to in the novel as “blank forms of consignment,” warrants for imprisonment used by nobles to sentence their enemies to prison.

The Law of the Suspected – This law permitted the revolutionaries a wide range of excuses for ordering executions.

The Reign of Terror – Beginning in 1793, this is the period when Marie Antoinette, thousands of other aristocrats, and suspected anti-revolutionaries are executed.

Trumbils of the Revolution – These carts were used to transport the prisoners to the guillotine.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Considering that the book was written in installments for weekly publication, discuss how Dickens used chapter titles, foreshadowing, and cliff-hanger endings to maintain interest in his story each week.
2. Write a brief character sketch of Madame Defarge. Do you think she is justified in wanting Lucie and her family executed?
3. Why does Monsieur Defarge sympathize with Dr. Manette and his family?
4. Cite incidents in the novel to support this theme: As a force of nature, love is stronger than hate.
5. How does the phrase “recalled to life” impact the life of Jerry Cruncher?
6. Support or refute the following statement: Mr. Lorry is a consummate businessman and a loyal friend.
7. Contrast the characters Sydney Carton and Mr. Stryver. Which do you find more interesting?
8. In what ways may Darnay be said to be a man with a strong social conscience?
9. Do you think Lucie Manette had any power to help Carton mend his wasteful ways?
10. What epithet is used to describe each of the following characters: Madame Defarge, Mr. Lorry, Lucie, Dr. Manette, Miss Pross, and Jerry Cruncher?
11. When and why does Dr. Manette retreat from his life and begin making shoes again?
12. Define symbolism and explain the meanings of the following symbols in the novel: the color red, water, and Lucie’s hair.
13. What were the proximate causes given in this book for the French Revolution?
14. What is Dickens’ opinion of capital punishment?
15. Refer to the text to support or refute the following statement: Dickens is sympathetic to the plight of the French peasants but is opposed to mob rule.
16. Discuss the three examples of the existence of doubles in this novel. How do they add suspense and interest to the story?

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Book the First: Recalled to Life

Chapter 1: The Period

Vocabulary

- blunderbusses** – short muskets
- conceded** – granted as a privilege
- contraband** – smuggled goods
- epoch** – a particular historical period
- incredulity** – disbelief
- potentate** – one who wields great power
- requisition** – state of being called upon to perform a duty
- revelations** – acts of communicating truth or making it known
- superlative** – excellent
- turnkeys** – persons in charge of prisoners' keys

1. The first sentence in this novel is one of the most famous first lines in the history of literature. How is it also an example of parallelism?

2. Find the reference in this first chapter to the Continental Congress of 1775 that sent a list of complaints to the Parliament. What is Dickens' opinion of this list?

Chapter 3: A Disappointment

Vocabulary

antipathies – enmities, hatreds
asseveration – earnest declaration
immolate – kill as a sacrifice
refection – refreshment with food and drink
unimpeachable – beyond doubt or reproach

1. Briefly outline the charges the Attorney General presents against Mr. Darnay.

2. How does Mr. Solicitor-General try to discredit John Barsad's testimony?

3. How does Mr. Solicitor-General try to discredit Roger Cly's testimony?

4. In the following passage from the story, to what mystery is Darnay alerted by his uncle's behavior?

“As he bent his head in his most courtly manner, there was a secrecy in his smiling face, and he conveyed an air of mystery to those words, which struck the eyes and ears of his nephew forcibly.”

5. What does the note attached to the knife tell the reader about the identity of the Marquis' murderer?

Book the Third: The Track of a Storm**Chapter 1: In Secret**

Vocabulary

ambuscade – ambush
dragoon – military
egress – exit
equipages – carriages
farrrier – person who shoes horses
fraught – full of
ingress – entrance
postmaster – person who supplies courier horses
wicket – gate

1. Why does Darnay pay to have an escort to Paris?

2. What decree is passed by the revolutionary government of France the same day that Darnay leaves the safety of England to travel to Paris?

3. Why does Defarge refuse to help Darnay by contacting Mr. Lorry at Tellson's bank?

4. In the prison, why does Darnay compare the aristocrats jailed with him to ghosts?

5. What does it mean to be kept "In secret"?
