

# Historical Context: A Tale of Two Cities

*EXPLORING Novels*, 2003

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 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 because 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 Scotland. 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."

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