A Tale of Two Cities

CHARLES DICKENS 1859

A Tale of Two Cities is set before and during the French Revolution, and examines the harsh conditions and brutal realities of life during this difficult time. While the conditions before the revolution were deplorable, things were far from ideal afterward as the violence toward, and oppression of, one class was reversed once the poor overthrew the nobility. In the end, the only glimmer of hope comes with the heroic sacrifice of Sydney Carton, as he gives his life for the good of others.

According to Dickens’s Preface, the inspiration for the story came from two sources. The first was Wilkie Collins’s play The Frozen Deep, in which two rivals unknowingly embark on the same doomed Arctic expedition, and one ends up dying to save his rival. The second was Thomas Carlyle’s The French Revolution: A History. The details in the portions of A Tale of Two Cities that take place in France closely echo Carlyle’s work, and critics have noted that Carlyle’s account seems to be Dickens’s only source of historical information.

One of the most-discussed aspects of A Tale of Two Cities is the ambivalence with which Dickens seems to regard the revolution and the revolutionaries. Although he clearly understands why the French people rose up to overthrow their government and seize power for themselves, he seems troubled by the manner in which this occurred. The violence and brutality
of the revolution clearly bother him, and the lack of any real change, since the oppressed become the new oppressors, is an unnecessarily tragic outcome of the otherwise justified pursuit of a better life by the lower classes.

Dickens’s central concern, both in the novel and in his life, is how to achieve meaningful social change without violence and chaos. He sees people’s mentality as being significantly shaped by the institutions that govern their lives. Thus, even if the institution goes away, the mentality produced by it still remains. He describes how this happens in his depiction of the French Revolution: the oppressed do not find a new way to govern, rather they simply repeat the practices of the previous rulers, the very practices that led the oppressed to revolt in the first place.

For Dickens, the way out of this dead end is for individuals to change their ways of thinking in order to bring about meaningful institutional change and thus social progress. As Nicholas Rance notes in “Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities” (1859), Dickens tends “to subordinate the historical event to the illumination of private character,” for he sees individuals as the true engines of historical change. Carton is the model for this sort of change, as he gradually emerges from his selfish laziness and makes his final, dramatic sacrifice for the good of others.

Although he clearly favored the measured, gradual process of reform, Dickens worried that the pace of change in Britain was too slow and that the unmitigated misery of the poor might lead to violence. His account of the French Revolution is thus, in many ways, a cautionary tale for his own nation, a warning that, if genuine changes are not made, the ruling class could face the inexorable revenge of those pushed beyond the limits of human endurance.
time and the difficulty of making sense of it, but also establishes a direct parallel between the period leading up to the French Revolution and the time in which Dickens writes his book, over sixty years later. The first chapter elaborates upon the time period in which the novel begins (1775), describing both France and England in bitter detail as places of disorder and injustice where the ruling classes care nothing for the suffering of the lower classes. The first chapter ends with a sense of foreboding, of unavoidable fate leading inevitably to death, as events are set down "along the roads that lay before them."

The action of the novel begins in November 1775 with Jarvis Lorry, a British banker, traveling from London to Dover on his way to France. His coach is overtaken by Jerry Cruncher, a messenger from Lorry's employer, Tellson's Bank, instructing him to wait at Dover for a young woman. Lorry sends back the cryptic message "recalled to life," and awaits the arrival of Lucie Manette, who is to accompany him to France. Upon her arrival, Mr. Lorry, who was a friend of Lucie's dead father and who took her to England after she was orphaned in France, tells Lucie that her father is, in fact, still alive after having been unjustly imprisoned for eighteen years. Mr. Lorry is going to Paris to verify Dr. Manette's identity, and Lucie must also come to "restore him to life" after being "buried alive" for so many years.

The story shifts to Paris, where the scene begins with an extended metaphor that prefigures the bloodshed and destruction of the revolution to come. A cask of red wine drops and bursts on the street. A mob of poor people descends upon the wine, scooping it up with their hands and gleefully licking their fingers. One man, Gaspard, dips his finger in the wine and writes the word "blood" on the wall. This scene occurs outside of the wine shop of Monsieur and Madame Defarge, former servants of Dr. Manette who have been entrusted to care for him since his release from the Bastille, the most notorious prison in France. Mr. Lorry and Lucie arrive and visit Dr. Manette, who is physically and mentally fragile. He does not realize that he is no longer in prison and sits alone in an attic making shoes, oblivious to his new surroundings. Although he does not recognize his old friend, Mr. Lorry, he sees Lucie's resemblance to his dead wife, which brings him at least partially out of his fog and leads to an emotional reunion. Mr. Lorry then takes the Manettes back to England.

**Book the Second: The Golden Thread**
The events shift five years into the future. Dr. Manette is recovering well under the care of his daughter. Cruncher, the bank messenger of the opening scene, is called to court to assist Mr. Lorry during the trial of Charles Darnay, a French immigrant to Britain. Darnay, a gentleman, is charged with treason, accused of helping France fight against the British in the American Revolution.

During the trial, John Barsad and Roger Cly are called as eyewitnesses to Darnay's participation in the plot, as is Mr. Lorry, who is asked to identify Darnay as a fellow passenger on the boat to and from France. The Manettes are also called to identify him, although Dr. Manette cannot do so because of his poor condition at the time. Just as things look dire for Darnay, a singular event occurs—a member of the trial audience, Sydney Carton (who happens to be a friend of Darnay's lawyer, Mr. Stryver), turns out to look just like Darnay, thus putting all of
the witness identifications in doubt. Darnay is subsequently acquitted.

After the trial, Carton and Darnay dine together. Neither man is particularly fond of the other, but both are enamored of Lucie, who is clearly falling in love with Darnay. Carton is described as a bit of a drunkard who is disappointed by life and has no ambition. “I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me,” he tells Darnay. However, despite their differences, they are described as each other’s “counterpart,” and Carton muses to himself about changing places and having Lucie look on him as she does Darnay.

Four months after Darnay’s trial, the Manettes are doing well and both Carton and Darnay stop by often to pursue Lucie’s affections, although Carton does not appear to really want them. There is some concern about Dr. Manette’s mental well-being as Mr. Lorry and Lucie wonder if he is repressing his memory of how he came to be imprisoned. One evening, Darnay mentions his experiences as a prisoner in the Tower of London while awaiting trial, and describes how some workmen, while performing repairs, had discovered a message written by a prisoner hidden under the stone floor. Dr. Manette has a brief fit, but does not say why he is so unnerved by what Darnay said. As they all sit in the garden, a foreshadowing occurs as the footsteps of an unnamed and unseen multitude can be heard echoing on the stones of the streets around them, unnerving all but Carton, who welcomes the “great crowd coming one day into our lives.”

In Paris around the same time, the Marquis St. Evrémonde, a French nobleman who also happens to be Darnay’s uncle, visits the home of Monseigneur, an aristocratic clergyman. Monseigneur is a representative of the decadent, selfish, vain, and extravagant ruling class who feel that “the world was made for them.” Dickens humorously mocks him, describing, for example, how it takes four servants to prepare and serve his chocolate:

One lacquey carried the chocolate-pot into the sacred presence; a second, milled and frothed the chocolate… a third, presented the favoured napkin; a fourth… poured the chocolate out. It was impossible for Monseigneur to dispense with one of these attendants on the chocolate and hold his high place under the admiring Heavens. Deep would have been

the blot upon his escutcheon if his chocolate had been ignobly waited on by only three men; he must have died of two.

The ruling class suffers from the “leprosy of unreality,” engaging in inane, silly pursuits while ignoring the suffering of the poor and the problems of their nation. Their disdain for the lower classes is epitomized by the Marquis’s actions after his coach, traveling through the Defarge’s neighborhood, runs over and kills one of Gaspard’s children. The Marquis literally throws money at him and prepares to continue on his way. When Monsieur Defarge throws the money back at him, the Marquis exclaims: “You dogs… I would ride over any of you very willingly, and exterminate you from the earth.” A man “whiter than the miller,” looking like a “spectre,” follows him home, hanging from a chain behind the coach.

Darnay returns to France to visit his uncle, the Marquis. They have opposite political views: Darnay supports egalitarian, or democratic and classless, principles. The Marquis believes in keeping all power in the hands of the elite by any means necessary: “Repression is the only lasting philosophy. The dark deference of fear and slavery… will keep the dogs obedient to the whip.” Darnay laments the wrongs done by his family, while his uncle claims it is their “natural destiny” to live that way. Darnay disagrees and renounces his inheritance of the Marquis’s property and France itself. That night, Gaspard, the specter earlier seen behind the carriage, kills the Marquis while he sleeps, leaving a note signed “Jacques,” a very common name for French men, implying that Gaspard has killed in the name of the common people.

A year later, back in England, Darnay is a French teacher and fully in love with Lucie. He asks for Dr. Manette’s support and help in pursuing her. Dr. Manette agrees, so long as Lucie loves him back. Meanwhile, Carton confesses his love directly to Lucie, but says that he will not act upon it because he is incapable of making her happy. He claims that she inspires him to become a better man, but he lacks the energy to act upon that inspiration. He promises to “embrace any sacrifice” for her or for the ones that she loves.

Back in Paris, the Defarges are secretly working to organize republicans into an effective movement (in which everyone uses the name Jacques) and to stir opposition to the governing
regime. Monsieur Defarge is anxious and wants to speed the revolution on, but Madame Defarge is patient, waiting for the right moment in order for it to succeed. Meanwhile, she knits constantly, creating a register of all the wrongs committed by the regime and of the names of those to be killed once the revolution has succeeded.

They learn that a spy, Barsad (who earlier had given false testimony in Darnay’s trial), is to be stationed in their neighborhood. He comes to the wine shop and tries to trick Madame Defarge into saying something incriminating regarding the execution of Gaspard, who was arrested for killing the Marquis. She avoids the trap. However, Barsad does note that Monsieur Defarge is visibly troubled when he mentions that Lucie Manette is to marry Charles Darnay.

On the day of the marriage, Darnay reveals his real name to Dr. Manette—St. Evremond—causing him great distress and pushing him back into his trance-like state and obsessive shoemaking. He remains that way for nine more days, during which Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross, Lucie’s servant, attend to him. After he emerges from his state with no memory of it, Mr. Lorry presents his “case” to Dr. Manette for diagnosis, thus jogging his memory and leading to an apparent cure. After Darnay and Lucie return from their honeymoon, Carton pledges his friendship to Darnay, who reluctantly accepts it.

Several years later, Darnay and Lucie are the parents of a six-year-old daughter and all seems to be going well for them. However, a sense of foreboding hangs over them as the echoes of footsteps haunt them and, later, they hear an “awful sound, as of a great storm in France with a dreadful sea rising.” In July 1789, Mr. Lorry tells them of a growing uneasiness in France. The fire rages unabated for three years, and much of the French aristocracy flees the country, many of them to Britain. As they plot how to regain power, they, and their counterparts in Britain (including Mr. Stryver), refuse to acknowledge the causes of the revolution. They talk about it as if it were the one only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown—as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it—as if observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it inevitably coming.

In the midst of this intrigue, a letter arrives at Tellson’s Bank, addressed to the heir of the Marquis St. Evremond. The letter comes from a prisoner in Paris who appeals to the Marquis (now Darnay) to intervene on his behalf since the crimes with which he is charged resulted from his acting on behalf of the Marquis’s estate. Though no one but Dr. Manette knows of his identity, Darnay obtains the letter by chance and, in the spirit of noblesse oblige—a feeling of obligation to, and responsibility for, those beneath him—he immediately decides to depart for France. Believing he is innocent of any responsibility for the suffering of the poor, Darnay naively thinks that he can go and help without endangering himself. Without telling anyone, he leaves for Paris, as a glorious vision of doing good, which is so often the sanguine mirage of so many good minds, arose before him, and he even saw himself in the illusion with some influence to guide this raging Revolution.

Book the Third: The Track of a Storm

On his trip to Paris in August, Darnay learns of a decree condemning any returning aristocrats (“emigrants”) to death. He is arrested and escorted to Paris by Monsieur Defarge, where he is consigned to solitary confinement in La Force prison. Even though he knows that Darnay is married to the daughter of his comrade, Dr. Manette, Defarge refuses to help him
or send a message on his behalf because, he says, “my duty is to my country and the People.”

In September, having learned of Darnay’s imprisonment, Dr. Manette and Lucie come to Paris to help him. Because of his own severe mistreatment at the hands of the old regime, Dr. Manette has great influence on the revolutionaries whose plight he has shared. For several weeks, Dr. Manette works tirelessly on Darnay’s behalf. At the same time, episodes of madness and butchery proliferate as La Guillotine kills relentlessly. King Louis XVI is executed and the Republic is declared as three hundred thousand men rise up across France, like a “deluge rising from below, not falling from above,” as “the raging fever of a nation” runs rampant.

When Darnay’s trial begins, things look bad until Dr. Manette stands up for him, swaying the jury. Darnay is set free and even celebrated by the crowd who carries him home on their backs. However, the next day, Darnay is again arrested, having been denounced by Monsieur and Madame Defarge and Dr. Manette. When the doctor denies this, it is revealed that a testament written by him during his time in the Bastille has been found by Monsieur Defarge.

The testament details the crimes of the Marquis St. Evremond and his brother who, in 1757, raped a young woman and were responsible for the deaths of several peasants. The doctor was called to attend the woman and, repulsed by the action of these nobles, reported their crimes. They had him imprisoned under a lettre de cachet—a blank warrant that allowed powerful people to fill in the names of whomever they wished and have them imprisoned without trial—and for this and their other crimes, the doctor condemned the brothers, and all their descendants. Persuaded again by the words of Dr. Manette, the jury—described as “a jury of dogs empanelled to try the deer”—unanimously convicts Darnay and sentences him to death. Dr. Manette, horrified that he is responsible for Darnay’s death sentence, reverts to his trance and his shoemaking.

However, Carton has arrived in Paris at the time of the second arrest and is working behind the scenes to free Darnay. He discovers that Barsad is working as a spy in the prison and blackmails him to let Carton visit Darnay in his cell. Carton, making use of his resemblance to Darnay, switches places with him, first drugging him unconscious and then having Barsad take him out of the prison in Carton’s clothes. Unbeknownst to the others, who are set to leave Paris just before the execution in case there is further trouble for them, Darnay emerges from the prison instead of Carton, and they speed away toward Britain and a happy reunion.

Meanwhile, Madame Defarge, who happens to be the sister of one of the peasants murdered by the St. Evrémondes, has plotted to have the whole lot of them arrested as part of her own revenge on the Marquis’s descendants. She arrives at their house after they have left but encounters Miss Pross, who fights with her. Madame Defarge dies accidentally by her own hand when her gun goes off. As the Darnays and Mr. Lorry travel to London, Carton is executed in Paris, uttering another of the most famous lines in literature before he dies: “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.”

**THEMES**

**Revolution and Revolt**

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens conveys an ambivalent attitude toward the French Revolution. While it is clear from the beginning that he sympathizes with the French people, who are neglected and abused by the elite, it is equally clear by the end of his novel that he does not see the revolution as a success. Instead, he presents a vicious circle of history in which the oppressor becomes the oppressed, and vice versa, with no deeper change occurring that could be described as real progress.

Dickens knows quite clearly, however, the causes of the French Revolution, and he presents it, in many ways, as inevitable given the existing conditions. He repeatedly uses metaphors of nature—storms, earthquakes, fires, etc.—to describe the coming revolution. He establishes parallels between Britain and France early in the book and emphasizes them again later, after the revolution has begun, when the aristocracy still fails to understand their responsibility in creating the conditions that led to mass revolt. Dickens directly warns that, so long as the ruling class refuses to take responsibility for the way that they govern, they are destined to be violently overthrown:
It was too much the way of Monseigneur under his reverses as a refugee, and it was much too much the way of native British orthodoxy, to talk of this terrible Revolution as if it were the one only harvest... that had not been sown.

However, Dickens was always a reformer at heart, not a revolutionary. He does not ultimately present the French Revolution as a necessary, inevitable step toward freedom and democracy. Instead, he sees it as an understandable, though ultimately tragic, response to the failure of the ruling class to enact sufficient reforms that would improve the lives of the people and remove the motives for revolution. He concludes the book on a somewhat optimistic, hopeful note, not only with Carton’s individual sacrifice for the greater good and an image of reconciliation as he embraces the seamstress on the way to the guillotine, but directly through Carton’s thoughts as well:

I see... long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument, before it shall cease out of its present use. I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long, long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.

In the end, Dickens envisions a better future for the common people, not because of the revolution, but in spite of it, as the people gradually experience the kind of real change of heart (as Carton does) that is needed to spur progressive reforms.

**Violence and Brutality**

One thing is absolutely clear: though he may be guardedly optimistic about the possibilities for genuine change, Dickens is mortified by the use of violence and does not see it as the means to accomplish the changes that he desires. Though Dickens advocated for social reform throughout his professional life, he never believed that a violent revolution was a viable option. Indeed, one of the prime motives for his pursuit of reform was to prevent violent uprisings from happening in the first place.

The horror and outrage that Dickens expresses at the conditions experienced by the poor in both France and Britain is matched, and perhaps even exceeded, by the revulsion with which he regards the bloodiness and brutality of the uprisings. We see this not only in his description of the storming of the Bastille and the slaughter of the jailors, with their heads raised on pikes, but in the gory details with which he describes, at length, the attack on the aristocrat, Foulon.

For Dickens, all of this violence is just a repetition of the conditions before the revolution; only the perpetrators have changed. What is lost in the frenzy of class war and revenge is the possibility of truly changing the conditions and improving people’s lives. One group’s violence and oppression of another, no matter how real the grievances motivating it, is neither better, nor more justified, than any other.

Ultimately, Dickens seems to imply, only through private virtue rather than class war can change for the better occur. It is only through an individual’s heroic sacrifice for the greater good, like Carton’s—and not the self-interested and vengeful motives of a Madame Defarge—that social reform and justice can possibly be achieved. And though he ends the book on a somewhat optimistic note, it is also a very cautionary one, directed at his countrymen, warning of the potential violence awaiting it if the government does not enact necessary reforms.

**Women and War**

Women played a central role in the uprisings that led to the French Revolution. Through the characters of Madame Defarge and The Vengeance, a fellow female revolutionary, Dickens rightly includes women at the center of the story. However, his depiction of these women as aggressive, menacing Furies, who coldly calculate murder and revenge, takes their representation beyond the limits of social realism. Instead, as in many other Dickens novels—perhaps most famously with Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*—female characters tend to be associated with murder and death.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, these women are not merely associated with death, but are agents of it. In battle, “the women were a sight to chill the boldest.” They are threatening, cold, merciless, and intimidating, even pathologically compelled to seek revenge. And, tellingly, this pursuit of revenge has personal, emotional roots, as Madame Defarge ultimately seeks to avenge the murder of her brother by the St. Evrémondes. It was very common at the
time Dickens wrote the book to relegate female characters to the private sphere of personal and emotional relationships rather than the traditionally masculine public sphere of rational reasoning and political decision. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the factual and political reasons for the revolution are always discussed in an authoritative male voice, whether character or narrator. On the other hand, violence and inevitable death in the story are often associated with women and their bloodthirsty desire for revenge. Further, the novel contains hints that Madame Defarge’s motives are tainted by calculated self-interest rather than the selflessness implied in the motives of Monsieur Defarge and the Jacques.

Despite his inclusion of female revolutionaries, Dickens does not present them in the same vein that he does their male counterparts. Ultimately, he seems to imply that it is women’s impulse for vengeance that exacerbates, or makes worse, the conflict, preventing calmer, more rational heads from prevailing and ending the bloodshed.

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

**The French Revolution**

A variety of issues contributed to the French Revolution of 1789–99. There was widespread discontent in France with the privilege enjoyed by the nobility, land owners, and the Church that excluded the lower and middle classes from improving their situation. Peasants and wage earners suffered greatly under a system of land ownership that left them exploited and powerless, particularly under the heavy burden of taxation they bore to pay for the privileges and extravagances of the aristocracy. At the same time, Enlightenment philosophy championing the liberty and rights of individuals became popular and generated hope for change, particularly in the wake of the success of the American Revolution. On top of all this, a food shortage occurred, leading to widespread desperation.

In the late 1780s, with their problems unaddressed by King Louis XVI, the people began to rebel. To appease them, the king called for the election of a parliamentary body, which met in
1789. Instead of obeying the will of the King, the elected body declared itself to be the ruling authority and vowed to write a constitution. Violence erupted across France as peasants attacked the ruling classes, leading to the abolition of the feudal system and the nobility’s acceptance of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In 1791, the powers of the monarch were limited by law, but by then revolutionary fervor had taken grip. Revolutionaries fought under the motto, Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort! (Liberty, equality, brotherhood or death!). The monarchy was abolished altogether in 1792, and King Louis XVI was executed for treason.

Rather than a democratic government being established, a dictatorship was formed that imposed order by killing its potential opponents, particularly land owners and aristocrats. During this Reign of Terror (1793–94), over twenty-eight hundred people were guillotined in Paris alone. Dickens's horror at such brutality, especially since the violence was committed by those who had themselves been brutalized by the ruling class they overthrew, is at the heart of his novel.

**The Industrial Revolution and Victorian Britain**

From 1750–1850, Britain underwent an enormous cultural upheaval. Technological changes, such as the development of steam power and advances in the textile industry, combined with the rapid growth of overseas markets for trade, led to a major population shift from rural areas to the cities. At the same time, workers had very few rights or protections and were at the mercy of their employers. Hours were long (up to sixteen hours per day, six days per week), conditions were dangerous, wages were low, and a large portion of the workforce were children, who often experienced even worse conditions than adults.

In 1832, the Reform Bill was passed, which expanded voting rights to property-owning males but did little to address the needs and demands of the working class. In the 1840s, economic conditions declined, leading to widespread unemployment and even some localized riots. When conditions did not improve in the 1850s, Dickens and many others began to note parallels with the period leading up to the French Revolution.

**The 1848 Revolutions**

In January 1848, a rebellion broke out in Sicily and the people succeeded in imposing a constitution on their king. Soon after, similar rebellions broke out in Piedmont and Milan (in the north of what is now Italy), then quickly spread throughout Europe, to Austria, Germany, Poland, and France, as populations rose up against the rule of absolute monarchs and their often-corrupt appointed governors. In some places, constitutional monarchies were established. In other places, such as France, monarchs were forced to flee as their people attempted to establish republics governed by the people rather than a king.

While these uprisings did not make it across the English Channel, they came very close. Not only did Britain have its own popular movement, the Chartists, pushing for democratic reforms, it was also swamped by a large number of desperately poor Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine. The combination of these forces put great pressure on the British government to address the needs of its people. Through a policy of gradual reform, the government was able to avert the sort of mass uprisings that occurred on the continent.

Dickens was keenly aware of the potential for revolt in Britain. Indeed, he had been one of the leading advocates of reform in order to prevent violent uprisings. But after the events of 1848, he began to despair that reform would not be enough, especially since little progress had been made by the late 1850s. As quoted in Michael Goldberg’s article “Carlyle, Dickens, and the Revolution of 1848,” Edgar Johnson recounts that in the 1850s, Dickens noted the similarities between the “sullen, smouldering discontent” in England and the “general mind of France before the... Revolution,” worrying that the slightest incident might trigger a violent explosion. Dickens's conflicted feelings of sympathy for the downtrodden poor but fear of the violence of revolution permeates *A Tale of Two Cities*.

**CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

Because *A Tale of Two Cities* differs so greatly from Dickens's other works, it has received a mixed reaction from critics. While it remains one of the most popular and widely read of
Dickens’s works with the general public, *A Tale of Two Cities* is one of the least popular among Dickens fans and scholars of his work. It is frequently omitted from works on Dickens in general, and when it is discussed, it is often briefly dismissed as atypical and thus uninteresting or unimportant. Some critics, however, have found in the most unique element of the novel—its treatment of a specific historical event—an issue of great interest, precisely because it stands apart from the rest of Dickens’s novels.

While *A Tale of Two Cities* was popular when it was first published in 1859, the critical response was not so positive. Although some critics were enthusiastic—John Forster, in a review for the *Examiner*, praised the “author’s genius” and the “subtlety with which a private history is associated with a most vivid expression of the spirit of the days of the great French Revolution”—most were very critical. Reactions tended to be polarized, with few critics expressing mixed feelings. Some writers of the time considered it the best of Dickens’s novels, but the vast majority of them condemned it as flawed, inferior, and even immoral. As Ruth Glancy notes in “*A Tale of Two Cities*”:* Dickens’s Revolutionary Novel*, “Most of the critics writing in the intellectual and literary journals of the day considered popular success a good reason to condemn a work,” and many criticized it simply because it appealed to the masses.

Not all the criticism was directed at the book’s popularity, though. Many critics were dissatisfied by more substantive aspects of the book, such as its lack of humor, lack of memorable and entertaining characters, the implausibility of the plot, or the melodramatic and sentimental tone of many episodes. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, in a famous review written for the *Saturday Review* in 1859, combines criticism of the book’s mass appeal with outrage at its lack of artistic quality. He claims that
A Tale of Two Cities has been adapted to film and television a number of times, beginning in 1911 with the Vitagraph Films silent version, directed by William Humphrey and starring Maurice Costello and Florence Turner.

The 1935 production of A Tale of Two Cities, produced by David O. Selznick for MGM Studios, directed by Jack Conway, and starring Ronald Colman as Sydney Carton, in perhaps the most memorable role of his career, is considered one of the great film classics. It is available on Warner Home Video.

The 1958 British version of A Tale of Two Cities, directed by Ralph Thomas for Rank Organization Film Productions and starring Dick Bogarde as Carton, is a faithful retelling of Dickens's novel, although the scenes from the French Revolution are perhaps not as dramatic and compelling as the 1935 MGM adaptation. Though available on video, this film can be hard to find.

In 1980, A Tale of Two Cities was adapted for television by Artisan Entertainment for the Hallmark Hall of Fame movie series on CBS. Directed by Jim Goddard and starring Chris Sarandon as Carton, this version takes some liberties with the plot of the novel but is relatively faithful to the spirit and themes of the book. It is available on video.

In 1989, an excellent Anglo-French miniseries version of A Tale of Two Cities, starring James Wilby and John Mills, was directed by Philippe Monnier for British television and later shown in the United States on PBS's Masterpiece Theatre. This version is very faithful to the plot and pays great attention to realistic details of costume, setting, and language, and French actors play the French roles. It is available on video and DVD from Granada Television.

There are a variety of unabridged audio versions of A Tale of Two Cities. It is available in cassette, CD, and MP-3 formats from Audio Editions.

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History in *A Tale of Two Cities,*” have taken this observation one step further, seeing in Dickens’s novel a grim view of history in which the French Revolution is just one event in a greater cycle of historical violence, one from which it is impossible to escape. But regardless of whether critics see Dickens as commenting specifically on the French Revolution or on general historical processes, or whether they focus on themes or on the depiction of historical events, the question of how Dickens views the possibility of change is most prominent in modern criticism.

**CRITICISM**

*Robert Alter*

_In the following excerpt, Alter notes how Dickens explores the relationship between evil and history in the perpetuation of cycles of violence. He argues that the novel, through its use of allegory, is less about a specific historical moment than a meditation on the impersonal forces (primarily destructive) that determine history as they work through individuals._

What Dickens is ultimately concerned with in *A Tale of Two Cities* is not a particular historical event—that is simply his chosen dramatic setting—but rather the relationship between history and evil, how violent oppression breeds violent rebellion which becomes a new kind of oppression. His account of the ancien régime and the French Revolution is a study in civilized man’s vocation for proliferating moral chaos, and in this one important regard the *Tale* is the most compellingly “modern” of his novels. He also tries hard, through the selfless devotion of his more exemplary characters, to suggest something of mankind’s potential for moral regeneration; but he is considerably less convincing in this effort, partly because history itself offers so little evidence that the imagination of hope can use to sustain itself.

The most powerful imaginings of the novel reach out again and again to touch ultimate possibilities of violence, whether in the tidal waves of mass destruction or in the hideous inventiveness of individual acts of cruelty. In the first chapter we are introduced to France through the detailed description of an execution by horrible mutilation, and to England by a rapid series of images of murder, mob violence, and hangings. Throughout the novel, the English mob is in potential what the French revolutionary hordes are in bloody fact. At the English trial of the falsely accused Darnay, the “ogreish” spectators, eagerly awaiting the condemnation, vie with one another in their lip-smacking description of how a man looks being drawn and quartered. Again in France, the details of torture and savagery exercise an obscene fascination over the imagination of the characters (and perhaps of the writer as well)—nightmarish images of tongues torn out with pincers, gradual dismemberment, boiling oil and lead poured into gaping wounds, float through the darkness of the novel and linger on the retina of the memory.

The energy of destruction that gathers to such acts of concentrated horror pulses through the whole world of the novel, pounding at its foundations. It is conceived as an elemental force in nature that works through men as well. Dover Beach as Jarvis Lorry contemplates it near the beginning of the novel is a replica in nature of the revolution to come, the scene most strikingly serving as event: “The sea did what it liked, and what it liked was destruction. It thundered at the town, and thundered at the cliffs, and brought the coast down madly.” The image of the revolutionary mob, much later in the novel, is simply the obverse of this vision of the ocean as chaos and darkness: “The sea of black and threatening waters, and of destructive upheaving of wave against wave, whose depths were yet unfathomed and whose forces were yet unknown. The remorseless sea of turbulently swaying shapes, voices of vengeance.” These same pitiless forces are present in the rainstorm that descends upon the quiet Soho home of the Manettes as Lucie, Darnay, and Carton watch: the lightning, harbinger of revolution, that they see leaping from the stormy dark is the only light that can be born from the murky atmosphere of this world—the hot light of destruction. Later the revolution is also likened to a great earthquake, and when Madame Defarge adds to this her grim declaration—“Tell wind and fire where to stop ... but don’t tell me”—all four elements of the traditional world-picture have been associated with the forces of blind destruction, earth and water and fire and air.

There is, ultimately, a peculiar impersonal-ity about this novel, for it is intended to dramatize the ways in which human beings become the
slaves of impersonal forces, at last are made inhuman by them. In order to show the play of these elemental forces in history, Dickens adopts a generalizing novelistic technique that frequently approaches allegory, the mode of imagination traditionally used for the representation of cosmic powers doing battle or carrying out a destined plan. The Darkness and Light of the novel’s first sentence are almost immediately supported by the introduction of two explicitly allegorical figures in the same chapter; the Woodman, Fate; and the Farmer, Death. In the action that follows, events and characters often assume the symbolic postures and formal masks of allegory.

The man seen clinging to the chains of the Marquis’s carriage, “all covered with dust, white as a spectre, tall as a spectre,” is no longer the flesh-and-blood father of the child murdered by the Marquis but has become a ghastly Messenger, sent to exact vengeance from the nobleman. The Marquis himself, always seen from an immense distance of implacable irony, is far more an allegorical representation of the French ruling classes than an individual character. The elaborate figure used to describe the Marquis’s death—a new face struck to stone by the Gorgon’s head—is entirely appropriate, for his death is not a “realistic” murder but the symbolic acting out of the inexorable workings of retribution. In this novel, it is fitting that one Frenchwoman should actually be called “The Vengeance”; the narrator at the end will ironically bid her by name to shout aloud after a Thérèse Defarge who is forever beyond answering. It is equally fitting that Charles Darnay’s French name, Evrémonde, should sound like an English name of a different sort: he is the Everyman who is drawn to the heart of destruction and virtually gives up his life there, in legal fact and physical appearance, to be reborn only through the expiatory death of another self, and so to return to his beloved, whose name means “light.”

The essence of history, at least when we view it retrospectively, is inevitability, for history above all else the record of what has already happened, which, because it has already happened, must forever be as it is and not otherwise. By dramatically translating this notion of inevitability into the irreversible progress of violence in the life of a nation, Dickens, who is usually anything but an austere writer, gives this novel a kind of oblique reflection of the stern grandeur of the Greek tragedies, where inexorable fate works itself out through human lives. “At last it is come,” Defarge declares to his wife as the Revolution begins, the affirmation of an eternally destined decree ringing through his words. It is as though a law of moral physics were operating with mathematical certainty in the events of history: “Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms.”


Sources


