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A Tale of Two Cities

by

Charles Dickens

1859



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set in two cities, London, England and Paris, France. It has the French Revolution as its background. The novel covers a period of eighteen years. It starts in 1775, fourteen years before the.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Dr. Alexandre Manette - a French physician who is imprisoned for eighteen years in the Bastille, by the Marquis St. Evremonde. He is rescued and nursed back to health by his.....

Charles Darnay - the protagonist of the novel, who is a French nobleman by birth. He is a good man who renounces his inheritance and his title, preferring to earn an honest living as a.....

Lucie Manette Darnay - the beautiful and compassionate daughter of Dr. Manette, who becomes the wife of Charles Darnay. She is a very virtuous woman who reaches out to all human.....

Sydney Carton - a clever barrister who resembles Darnay in appearance. Carton wastes his life by.....

Monsieur Ernest Defarge - a wine-seller in Paris. He had been Dr. Manette's servant and becomes a leader of the revolutionaries.

Madame Therese Defarge - the wife of Ernest Defarge, who is a cruel, embittered, and vengeful woman. She has a watchful eye and records, in her knitting, the names of all those.....

Minor Characters

Mr. Jarvis Lorry - an official of Tellson's bank who befriends the Manette family.

Miss Pross - Lucie's devoted English nurse who is a woman of great strength and courage. She fiercely protects Lucie from any harm.

Jeremy Cruncher - an odd-job man, who sits outside Tellson's bank during the day and is....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Conflict of interests and clash of characters are to be found throughout the narrative. The conflict between the upper and lower classes results in revolution. At this level, the mob's clashes with their enemies often conflict with their own goals and interests. Inner conflict also presents itself. Dr. Manette struggles with two sides of his personality - - the one that has suffered and seeks retribution and the other that has been resurrected by the love and devotion of his daughter. Sydney Carton faces a deep inner conflict, but emerges as Darnay's redeemer. Momentarily, Monsieur Defarge, too, faces a conflict between loyalty to Dr. Manette and his new found patriotism.

Protagonist - Charles Darnay (born Evremonde) is the protagonist of the novel. His connection with the aristocracy makes him the key figure of both levels of the narrative; one level deals with his private life and the other deals with the revolution. He falls in love and marries the beautiful.....

Antagonist - Darnay's antagonist is the revolution; although he takes no part in it, he incurs the wrath of his adversaries because of his noble birth. Amongst the revolutionaries, his main

Climax - Although there are many minor climaxes that occur throughout the plot, leading up to the final resolution of the conflict, the real turning point in the novel is the death of Madame Defarge. Darnay has escaped execution, through the sacrifice of Carton, and he and his family have.....

Outcome - The story ends in comedy for Darnay, because he and his family can return to England and live in peace. The peace, however, is bought at a high price, with many lives.....

NOTE - Dickens also depicts Dr. Manette as another key figure in the two strands of the narrative. The father of Lucie, he is also the victim of the aristocrats, just as his son-in-law is the victim of.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In 1775, Mr. Jarvis Lorry, an official of Tellson's Bank in London, accompanies Lucie Manette to Paris. He has information that her father, Dr. Alexandre Manette, who had disappeared eighteen years ago, is alive. He had been wrongfully imprisoned in the Bastille and left there to die. Lucie is shaken when she learns that her father is still living. On reaching Paris, they go to the house of Monsieur Defarge, a wine-seller. He had been Dr. Manette's servant and has taken care of him after his release from prison. Both Mr. Lorry and Lucie are shocked to see the terrible state Doctor Manette is in. He has aged prematurely, having lost both his memory and his sense. He spends his time cobbling shoes. The revolutionary ardor and hatred against oppression are fanned every time Defarge and his associates look at this wreck of a man, who has been a victim of the aristocracy. Mr. Lorry and Lucie take her father back to London. With love and compassion, Lucie plans to nurse her father back to health and sanity.

Five years later, in 1780, a young Frenchman, named Charles Darnay, is accused of being a traitor and a spy. Lucie and her father are reluctant witnesses for the prosecution, as they had met him while travelling from Calais to Dover. Lucie stresses the good qualities of the accused while imparting her testimony. The evidence against him is overwhelming as the prosecution produces a number of witnesses who swear that he is a spy. The onlookers, too, mentally condemn him and are waiting for the death sentence to be pronounced. However, it is Sydney Carton, an advocate present in the courtroom, who points out the resemblance between the prisoner and himself to the defense lawyer Mr. Stryver. The jury thus realizes that it.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The major theme centers on resurrection, bringing people back to life from the seemingly inevitable clutches of death. Dr. Manette is rescued from long imprisonment and certain death and nursed back to health by the loving attention of his daughter Lucie. Darnay is twice saved from certain death.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme is the cruelty of war as seen in the French Revolution. Dickens spares no details in painting the grim, and often senseless, violence of the patriot mob as they.....

MOOD

The mood of the novel is grim and somber. Dickens presents the stark reality of the revolution in an intense, dramatic form, and there are very few incidents that help lighten the grimness. Right from the start, the tragedy of Dr. Manette seated at his shoemaker's bench drives home the horror of.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812. He was the son of John and Elizabeth Dickens. His father, who was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, had a poor head for finances and was imprisoned in 1824 for debt. Dickens was twelve years old when he was sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, while the rest of his

family joined his father in the Marshalsea Prison. During this time, he lived alone, ashamed and frightened, in a lodging house. These early experiences became a source of creative energy and a reason for his preoccupation with the themes of alienation and betrayal. These early experiences also made him a self-reliant, hard-working and dedicated writer.

Dickens returned to school after the financial difficulties were over. When he was fifteen, he went to work as a clerk in a law firm. Later he became a free-lance reporter, first of dull law cases and then of parliamentary debates. These experiences helped shape his social consciousness. In 1830, he fell in love with Maria Beadwell, the daughter of a banker, but the relationship was short-lived, as he was not considered a good match by her parents. He then met and became engaged to Catherine Hogarth in 1835. He married Catherine on April 2, 1836.

Dickens' first published story appeared in 1835. He also started writing under the

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A Tale of Two Cities is a popular, historic novel set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. It was initially published as a serial in the weekly entitled *All Year Round*, from April 30 to November 29, 1859. The novel concentrates on the social and psychological crises more than on a retelling of the actual historical event of the war. Dickens' vision of the Terror encompasses aristocratic exploitation and neglect of the poor, public bloodshed, and private vengeance.

Dickens' source of the French Revolution is undoubtedly Thomas Carlyle's monumental work, *The French Revolution*. He is also indebted to Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Zanoni* and Watt Philips' play *The Dead Heart*, both having the French Revolution as their background. Even though Dickens relied upon other works, his vision and view in *A Tale of Two Cities* are clearly his own. He expresses his views most

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

BOOK ONE: Recalled to Life

Chapter One: The Period

Summary

In the opening chapter, the period in which the novel is set is described. The story begins about fifteen years before the French Revolution. It is a time when many people think they live in the best of times, while others condemn it as the worst of times. The kings of England and France are both mediocre rulers, and they believe in their divine rights. People are put to death for the slightest of crimes.

The condition in France is very bad, for there is a total disregard for the common people by the aristocracy; injustice, cruelty, and oppression are rampant. The aristocracy is unaware that the masses are preparing for the revolution by turning timber into guillotines and farm carts into tumbrels to convey people to the guillotine. In England, too, lawlessness and poverty prevail. Even the colonies in America are up in arms against their English rulers, and the attempts of the American colonies to obtain freedom are not taken seriously.

Notes

The opening sentence of the novel is striking, for it is made up of a series of superlatives that are opposite in meaning; therefore, from the opening line, Dickens conveys that this novel is set in the best of times for some and the worst of times for others. He continues by exposing the mediocrity of both the French and English kings and criticizes the doctrine of their divine right. The revolution was fought to negate this right; ironically, similar rights are later seized by the revolutionaries. This is indicated by the mention of both the guillotine and the tumbrel, which become the symbols of the revolution.

Dickens successfully compares authoritarian France with lawless England, showing one as semi-totalitarian and

the other as semi-anarchic. In both locations, the conditions cause unhappiness, especially among the common people. Chapter one, therefore, sets the stage for the action of the novel where the common people will rise up against the cruelties that prevail against them. It also sets the troubled tone that is strengthened throughout the novel. Finally, it reveals that the author is more concerned with the plight of the common people living during these troubled times than with the politics of the period.

Chapter Two: The Mail

Summary

The Dover mail coach makes its way laboriously up Shooter's Hill on a wet Friday night in November, 1775. Tired horses are dragging the coach while the passengers trudge alongside. Because of the general state of affairs in England, the passengers are suspicious of the driver, of the guard, and of one another; they are also afraid of ambush from the outside. A messenger arrives with a message for Mr. Jarvis Lorry, who is an agent of Tellson's Bank and one of the passengers. The message is that Mr. Lorry needs to wait in Dover to meet a young lady. Mr. Lorry sends a return message to the bank that states only, "recalled to life." The messenger thinks the message is very strange, but agrees to deliver it. Mr. Lorry goes back into the coach.

Notes

The second chapter of the book serves several purposes. It introduces Mr. Lorry, who will help the Manettes throughout the novel. It also introduces two of the main characters of the book, although they remain unnamed. The young lady that Lorry is to meet in Dover is Lucie Manette; the man who has been all but buried alive is her father, Dr. Manette.

The chapter also gives a reflection of the times through the isolated passengers who are wary of one another and fearful of ambush from the outside. As a group, they serve as a metaphor for everyone in England who is fearful of the anarchy that is rampant all around them. Through these symbolic passengers, the theme of human alienation is introduced. Since all people suffer some sense of isolation, Dickens philosophically concludes that at a basic level all people are equal, despite differences in class and status.

The chapter also sets the predominant moods of the novel. The times are dark and troubled, and the setting here is in the blackness of night with passengers who are troubled about their safety. The horses pulling the coach and the people travelling alongside are both very tired. There is fog overhead and mud underfoot, causing great discomfort for the travelers. In spite of the predominantly dark and troubled mood, Dickens' inevitable humor finds a place in this chapter. He paints a comic picture of the coachman and the guard as they ponder over the strange message that Lorry receives.

Finally, the chapter introduces an element of suspense. The reader is made to wonder who the young lady in Dover is and why Lorry needs to meet her. There is also curiosity about the man who has been buried away in prison for eighteen years. Finally, there is mystery in the cryptic message that Lorry sends back to the bank; the words "recalled to life" seem to suggest that someone is being resurrected from the dead.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Charles Darnay, originally St. Evremonde - Charles Darnay, a French aristocrat by birth, is the protagonist of the novel. He is a noble person in the true sense of the word and a foil to his wicked uncle, the Marquis St. Evremonde. Taught by his mother to be compassionate, Darnay abhors the system into which he was born. As a result, he migrates to England, where he renounces both his name and his inheritance. In London, he falls in love with and marries Lucie Manette. Ironically, she is the daughter of a doctor who was falsely imprisoned for years in Paris as a result of the cruelty of the Evremondes.

Lucie and Charles are happily married and have a lovely daughter little Lucie. Neither husband nor wife has any idea that Dr. Manette has a connection to or hatred of the Evremonde family. Because of his love for Lucie and his desire for her happiness, the Doctor foregoes his desire for vengeance

Sydney Carton - Carton resembles Charles Darnay physically, but he is very different in character. Carton is a heavy drinker, an idler, and an unrecognized lawyer. His friend Stryver, dubs him as a man without energy or purpose, and yet Stryver's success is wholly dependent on the astute legal efforts of Carton. Carton recognizes that he lacks ambition and is wasting his life. In fact, he confesses to Lucie that he.....

Dr. Alexandre Manette - Dr. Manette is a French physician. He was thrown in prison and left to die there for eighteen years, because he witnessed a crime committed by the Evremonde brothers and had tried to report it to the authorities. His imprisonment and release are the hub around which the story revolves. Dr. Manette's long solitary confinement leads to loss of memory, temporary insanity, and premature aging. At the time of his release, he can only call himself by his cell number, one hundred and five, and

Lucie Manette - Lucie is a typical Victorian heroine who is beautiful, gentle, frail, and given to fainting under stress; but she has a remarkable inner strength that is derived from practicing Christian virtues. She shows love and compassion for all mankind; in return, she is very admired and loved. Although she is.....

Monsieur Defarge - Defarge is a victim of aristocratic tyranny and rages against the upper class. Good-humored by nature, Defarge becomes secretive, angry, and dangerous due to his hatred of the nobility and his strong desire for revenge. Because of his passion and spurred on by his evil wife, he.....

Madame Defarge - Madame Defarge, with her strong body, strong face, and strong features, likens herself to the wind, to fire, and to an earthquake. Like these natural force that are violent and cannot be stopped, Madame Defarge is ruthless and unstoppable. She is the "watchful eye" of the revolution, always.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The immense popularity of *A Tale of Two Cities* lies in Dickens' ability to simultaneously and graphically structure the revolution in France with the development of characters like Dr. Manette, Lucie, Darnay, Madame Defarge, Sydney Carton, and Miss Pross. Dickens realistically depicts the revolution and keeps the historic events in the forefront; the major events of the plot are made to coincide with the historical events, such as the fall of the Bastille, the killing of Foulon, and the Reign of Terror.

The fact that this novel was serialized explains the method of narration. Suspense and mystery appear at regular intervals throughout the novel in order to retain the interest of the reader between installments. The novel is divided into three books entitled "Recalled to Life," "The Golden Thread," and "The Track of the Storm." It covers approximately eighteen years from 1775-1793. Dickens must masterfully weave the plot to hold the story together over such a long period of time.

Book One begins in London and has as its starting point the discovery that Dr. Manette is alive. Lucie travels to Paris to meet her father for the first time and bring him back to London. Her plan is.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The major theme that runs through the story is that of **resurrection**. It is suggested by the title of the first book "Recalled to Life" and is present throughout the novel. Dr. Manette, who has been buried alive in prison is resurrected, when he is rescued and brought to freedom; then Lucie nurses him back to life, health, and happiness. Darnay is also saved from death on three different occasions, once

Vengeance (or retribution) is another theme that is woven into the entire fabric of the novel. Madame Defarge, The Vengeance, and the mob are seeking revenge for the innumerable.....

DICKENS' USE OF IRONY

Dickens uses irony very effectively throughout the narrative. Almost all the characters and situations of the plot are touched in some way by irony. It is ironic that Dr. Manette, who seeks revenge against the Evremondes, should find himself the father-in-law to a member of the Evremonde clan. It is further ironic that his love for Lucie and Darnay destroys the vengeance he feels and restores him to health.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Compare and/or contrast the two main female figures in the novel – Madame Defarge and Lucie Manette.
2. Compare and/or contrast two significant male figures – Darnay and Sydney Carton?
3. Why is the novel a tragic comedy?
4. What is Dickens' idea of the ideal of manliness? Who in the book best represents this concept?.....

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