A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens

A Tale of Two Cities was Charles Dickens's second historical novel and is set in the late eighteenth century during the period of the French Revolution. It was originally published in thirty-one weekly instalments between April and November 1859.

Chapters 1–2: The version of the story published here begins in the last decades of the eighteenth century, when the poor and oppressed of France were at last beginning to plan the downfall of the aristocracy. The book opens with the description of a poor suburb of Paris called Saint Antoine. A wine barrel is accidentally damaged and the poor people of the area rush to drink the wine from the street. The scene is witnessed by the local wine shop owner Monsieur Defarge, who is also a revolutionary leader. Monsieur Defarge is looking after his former employer, Dr Manette, who has recently been released from prison after spending many years locked up in the Bastille. Dr Manette spends his time in his room making shoes — a skill he learned while in prison. Two visitors from England, Mr Jarvis Lorry — a representative of Tellson's Bank — and Dr Manette's daughter, Lucie, have come to take the doctor back to England in order to help him restore his health.

Chapters 3–7: A year or so later, back in England, Charles Darnay, a young French aristocrat, is being tried for passing information on British troops to the French. Dr Manette and Lucie Manette give evidence in his favour, as they met him on the ship which brought them from France to England. Darnay, whose real name is Evrémonde, left France because he was disgusted by his family's treatment of the poor people around them. He has renounced his inheritance and intends to make his living by teaching French language and literature. Thanks to the Manette's evidence and to a clever intervention by Sydney Carton, a cynical and depressive English lawyer, Charles is acquitted and leaves the court a free man.

Chapters 8–9: Darnay and Carton have several things in common. They look very much alike and they both fall deeply in love with Lucie Manette. Charles is unaware that it was his own family that caused Dr Manette to be imprisoned in the Bastille when he tells the doctor of his love for Lucie. The doctor recognizes Charles, but bears him no grudge. Meanwhile, Carton realizes his love for Lucie is unrequited, but he tells her that she is so dear to him that he will do anything to help her or anybody she loves.

About the author

Charles Dickens, a world-famous author, born in 1812, was the son of a clerk in the Navy office. His irresponsible parents ran into great debt and when Dickens was twelve, his father was placed in a debtors’ prison and the boy was put to work in a factory for some months. Dickens's intense misery in this place made a profound impression on him and he drew greatly upon this experience in his novels. At the age of fifteen, Dickens started work as an office boy and then became a reporter of debates in the Houses of Parliament. He started writing for several journals and achieved his first success with a series of articles called Sketches by Boz. His first novel, The Pickwick Papers, published in serial form, became very popular and Dickens became a celebrity. In 1836, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his publisher. Oliver Twist, again written in serial form, was published between 1837 and 1839.

A steady stream of novels followed, about twenty in all. Dickens lived an extraordinarily active life; besides writing his novels and editing magazines, he championed a variety of social causes, among them the abolition of slavery and capital punishment, and the reform of prostitutes. He staged numerous theatrical productions and from 1858 onwards, he travelled through England and America, giving public readings of his novels. By the late 1850s, Dickens's marriage was in serious trouble and he separated from his wife in 1858, having become involved with the actress Ellen Ternan. Dickens died suddenly in 1870, a writer who had achieved admiration and acclaim in a way no other novelist had done before.
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Chapters 10–11: The story switches back to France in Chapter 10 and we learn of the execution of Gaspard, an inhabitant of Saint Antoine, for the killing of the Marquis of Evrémonde (who is in fact Darnay’s uncle), in revenge for the death of his child under the wheels of the Marquis’s carriage. On hearing the description of Gaspard’s execution, Monsieur and Madame Defarge, sensing the time is right, begin to make plans to wreak vengeance on the aristocracy in general, and on the Evrémonde family in particular.

Chapter 12: Back in London, Charles marries Lucie. The joyful day is marred by the doctor suffering a relapse into his previous mental disorder as he remembers how he suffered at the hands of Charles’s uncle and father. The doctor stays shut away in his room for several days until Mr Lorry manages to make him realize what has happened to him.

Chapters 13–17: Meanwhile in France, the revolutionaries are gaining the upper hand. Castles are being destroyed, the Bastille is taken by the crowd and many aristocrats are being arrested and executed at the guillotine. Mr Lorry is sent to Paris by Tellson’s Bank in order to help save as many assets of the bank’s French customers as possible. Via the bank, Charles receives a letter from his former servant in France telling him that he has been arrested and will be executed. His only chance of survival is if Charles comes to France in order to explain to the court how the servant was trying to help the poor. Charles is torn between his family in England and his duty to his former servant, but he decides to return secretly to his home country. Not long after his arrival in France, Charles is arrested for being an émigré. He is taken to see Defarge and is put in prison while he awaits trial. Dr Manette hears of Charles’s plight and comes to Paris himself. Thanks to his years of imprisonment in the Bastille, he is able to win the trust and confidence of the crowd and manages to keep Charles safe until the trial.

Chapters 18–22: At the trial, Dr Manette’s evidence is again a determining factor in ensuring Charles’s acquittal, but their joy is short-lived as Charles is re-arrested after being accused by Monsieur and Madame Defarge on the evidence of a letter written by Dr Manette himself during his time in prison. The letter tells of how Charles’s uncle and father had the doctor thrown into prison without trial and when it is read out in court the result is devastating – Charles Darnay is found guilty and sentenced to death.

Chapters 23–27: All seems lost for Charles, but his rescue comes from an unexpected quarter. Sydney Carton, who has sworn his love to Lucie, devises a daring plan to substitute himself for Charles. He manages to enlist the help of a spy and gets into the prison on the eve of the execution. He exchanges clothes with Charles and drugs him to stop him protesting. Charles leaves the prison in a drugged state in the arms of the spy, while Carton prepares to die in his place, telling himself that ‘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.’

Background and themes

Revolution: The French Revolution, which began in 1789 and continued with extreme violence until 1799, turned the country of France upside down. The Bastille, a prison in Paris famous for its political prisoners, was stormed by a mob on 14 July 1789 and the prisoners were released. The King and Queen of France were imprisoned and executed, as were thousands of aristocrats. They were sent to the ‘guillotine’, a large device used to behead people, which was set up in a public square. During the ‘Days of Terror’, many innocent people were wrongly accused of sympathizing with the old regime and were guillotined. It was an extremely bloody period, but out of the revolution the first constitutional government was born. In other words, this was a government that operated according to written and agreed principles about the rights of every individual in the country. It is true to say that the French Revolution, one of the first of its kind in the world, set a formidable example to other countries. It taught the world that ordinary people had rights and that governments could be overthrown by ordinary people.

Social injustice: The theme of social injustice is strongly present in this novel, as it is in many other of Dickens’s works. Dickens, who had great sympathy for poor people, having known great poverty himself as a child, was naturally drawn towards the French Revolution, as a subject for a novel. In A Tale of Two Cities he depicts with tremendous power and realism the sufferings of the poor, and the way in which aristocrats oppressed and abused them. He shows, with great insight, how ordinary men and women were driven by their suffering to become implacable murderers of the aristocracy.
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**Violence and death:** Death and, perhaps more precisely, killing and violence in general form one of the main themes of the book. Dickens describes eighteenth century attitudes to killing in appalling detail, beginning with the running over of Gaspard’s child by the remorseless Marquis, continuing with graphic descriptions of mob violence, and ending with Sydney Carton’s heroic execution at the guillotine.

**Entrapment:** It has been suggested that the plight of Dr Manette and the effect his imprisonment had on him may be seen as a reflection of Dickens’s sense of being trapped in a loveless marriage. When he wrote this novel in 1859, he was forty-seven years old. His marriage to Catherine Hogarth had failed and he no longer lived with her. He had fallen in love with a young actress called Ellen Ternan, but in those days it was unthinkable that he should live with her. He had fallen in love with a young actress called Ellen Ternan, but in those days it was unthinkable that he should live with her. Critics have also suggested that Ellen, who was blond and blue-eyed, could have been the model for Charles Darnay’s beautiful wife, Lucie.

**Love and hate:** Two other important themes in the book are love and hate. Hate is embodied in Madame Defarge and her obsessive quest for vengeance on the Evrémonde family, while the power of love is exemplified by Sydney Carton’s act of self-sacrifice. Dickens had got the basic idea for the plot from a play where two men fall in love with the same woman; one of the men gives up his life to save the other man. At the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Carton, who is a clever man but who is dissatisfied and disappointed with the way he has lived his life, does something utterly heroic. He gives up his life to save Charles Darnay, knowing that this will protect Lucie, the woman he loves, from terrible unhappiness. This is the ultimate self-sacrifice. Again, critics have speculated, that Dickens was – subconsciously or even consciously – writing about ‘sacrifice’ because of the tremendous sacrifice he had to make in no longer being able to live more closely with Ellen Ternan.

**Discussion activities**

**Before reading**

1. **Research:** Tell the students that *A Tale of Two Cities* is set during the French Revolution. For homework, students use the Internet and reference books to find out more about the period. Each student should write ten simple sentences about it. Then, in class, put the students into groups of three or four and ask them to share their information. Finally, elicit information from the class and put it on the board. You may also wish to add more facts about the subject yourself.

**Chapters 1–5**

**After reading**

2. **Pair work:** Write the following list of characters on the board: Lucie Manette, Dr Manette, Charles Darnay, Jarvis Lorry, Sydney Carton, Monsieur Defarge. Working individually, the students write down the above characters in order, according to how interesting they find each of them. Then put the students into pairs and tell them to compare each other’s list. They must explain why they chose the order that they did and, if they differ, try to come to an agreement about the order so that they can present a common list to the rest of the class.

3. **Write:** The trial of Charles Darnay

Tell the students to re-read Chapter 3 very carefully because they are going to re-write the chapter in the form of a stage play with the following characters: Charles Darnay, Mr Stryver, the judge, the Government lawyer, John Barsad, Roger, Cly, Miss Manette, Dr Manette, Sydney Carton. Some of the dialogue is already present in the book, but some is presented in the form of indirect speech and so the students will have to re-formulate these parts of the chapter. When the groups have finished, they exchange their scripts with another group and check it for errors of grammar and vocabulary. At the end of the activity, they hand their scripts in to the teacher, who will choose the best script to be performed as the following role play.

4. **Role play:** Put the students into groups so that each member of the group will play at least one character at the trial. The maximum size of the groups is therefore nine, but as some of the roles are rather small (e.g. Sydney Carton doesn’t say much), you may prefer to have smaller groups with one or more students playing more than one role. Once the groups have been established, the roles are allocated to the students and they practise reading the script out loud as if it were a radio play. They should work on their pronunciation and intonation. Go round the class to monitor the activity and to give advice where needed. If there is sufficient time and space, and motivation on the part of the students, you may decide to get the students to act out the scene for their classmates, although given the length of the scene and the number of students involved, it is more straightforward to restrict the role play to a reading out loud activity.

5. **Guess:** On page 16, Sydney Carton tells Charles Darnay that ‘The world has no good in it for me, and I am of no good to the world’. Put the students into groups of three or four. Ask them to discuss the following questions: Why do you think Sydney Carton feels so negatively about his place in the world? Why does Carton dislike Charles Darnay so much? After five or ten minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole group.
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Chapter 6
After reading
6 Discuss: After they have read Chapter 6, give the students five minutes to jot down how they feel about the character of the Marquis of Evrémonde. Ask one of the students to give their opinion and write up on the board any key words. Then invite another student to add their comments. Continue round the class for as long as the students remain interested.

7 Guess: Put the students into small groups. Ask them to re-read the end of Chapter 6 carefully and to try to imagine who the man hiding under the Marquis of Evrémonde's carriage was. They should try to answer the following questions: Why was he hiding there? What does he want? After a few minutes, ask each group to present their ideas to the rest of the class.

Chapter 7
After reading
8 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Ask them how they think Darnay and his uncle feel about each other. Tell them to write down a few ideas. Then tell them to practise reading out the dialogue between the two men on pages 26–28. Ask one or two of the pairs to perform the dialogue in front of the whole class.

9 Guess: Working individually, the students try to guess who killed the Marquis and for what motive. Ask for volunteers to present their ideas to the rest of the class.

Chapters 8–9
After reading
10 Discuss: Why do so many men in the story fall in love with Lucie Manette? Put the students in groups of three or four. Tell them to discuss the above question and to be prepared to present their opinions to the rest of the class. After a suitable length of time – say fifteen minutes – each group elects a spokesperson to come and present the group's findings to the whole class.

11 Write: How does Lucie feel after Carton's declaration of love? Working individually, students write an entry in Lucie's diary in which she says what she thinks of him and how his declaration has affected her.

Chapter 10
After reading
12 Discuss: Tell the students to read Chapter 10 carefully and to pay particular attention to what happens to the road mender. Working in pairs, the students compare and note down the differences between the road mender's life in the village and the few days he spends with the Defarges. Tell the students to discuss the following question: How do you think the road mender has been affected by his time with the Defarges? Give the pairs ten minutes or so to discuss the question and then call on volunteers to present their ideas to the rest of the class.

13 Guess: Working in small groups, ask the students to imagine what is going to happen next in the story. You might like them to consider the following questions: Will Defarge and his accomplices find out that Darnay is a member of the Evrémonde family? What will they ask the road mender to do?

Chapter 11
After reading
14 Role play: Write the names of the following three characters on the board: Monsieur Defarge, Madame Defarge, John Barsad. Working individually, the students write down as many words and expressions as they can to describe each of these characters (their occupation, their appearance and their personality). After a few minutes, put the students into groups of three and tell them to each choose one of the roles and to practise reading out loud the dialogues in Chapter 11. After a few minutes, call upon one or two of the groups to perform the dialogues to the rest of the class.

Chapter 12
After reading
15 Write: Tell the students to imagine that after he diagnoses and recovers from his mental disorder, Dr Manette decides to record the details in his diary. Working individually, students write this diary entry. When they have finished, they show their work to another student, who corrects it for both factual and language errors.

Chapters 13–14
After reading
16 Debate: Is violence ever justified?
Chapters 13 and 14 recount some rather violent episodes as the people of France seek to overthrow the regime. Divide the class into two equally-sized groups. Tell them that they are going to have a debate on the above question. Write the following statement on the board: This house believes that violence is never morally justified. Regardless of their personal views, allocate to one half of the class the role of arguing in favour of the statement, and to the other half, allocate the role of arguing against the statement. Give the groups enough time to prepare their arguments and to elect two spokespersons. Then proceed with the debate, with the two speakers in favour going first. At the end of the debate have the class vote on the question.

Chapters 15–19
After reading
17 Discuss: Tell the students to re-read Gabelle's letter to Darnay on page 64. Put them into small groups and have them answer the following questions: How do you think Darnay feels when he reads the letter? What would you do if you were in Darnay's place? Would you tell anybody about the letter? Would you go to France to
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try to help Gabelle? Tell the students they must be prepared to justify their answers. After ten or fifteen minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole class.

18 Role play: In Chapter 16 Charles Darnay returns to France and is arrested. Split the class into two equal halves. Ask one half of the class (group A) to imagine they are in Darnay’s position, and the other half of the class (group B) to imagine they are in the position of the officials in France. Working in pairs, the students think of as many arguments as they can in favour of their allocated position. After ten minutes or so, create new pairs so that each new pair is made up of a student from group A and a student from group B. Now ask the students to act out a scene in the guard house – just before Darnay is handed over to Defarge – during which Darnay seeks to persuade the official that he should be set free.

19 Write: At the end of Chapter 17 we can read that Dr Manette never doubted that ‘he would save Lucie’s husband in the end’. Working individually or in pairs, the students write a letter from Dr Manette to Mr Lorry explaining why he feels so confident that he will be successful in his attempt to save his son-in-law.

20 Write: The second trial of Charles Darnay
This activity is essentially the same as Activity 3 above. Tell the students to re-read pages 81–83 in order to be able to re-write the chapter in the form of a stage play with the following characters: Charles Evrémonde, called Darnay, the judge (the President), Dr Manette, Theophile Gabelle, the crowd, the jury. Again, although some of the dialogue is already written in the book, some of it is presented as indirect speech, so the students will have to re-formulate these passages. When the groups have finished, they exchange their scripts with another group and check it for errors of grammar and vocabulary. At the end of the activity, they hand their scripts in to the teacher, who will choose the best script to be performed as the following role play.

21 Role play: Allocate the roles of Darnay, Dr Manette, the judge and Theophile Gabelle to four students. The rest of the class play the crowd and the jury. Distribute the script to the students and they practise reading it out loud as if it were a radio play. Monitor their pronunciation and intonation and provide feedback. Read the scene several times. If there is sufficient time, re-allocate the roles to different students and repeat the activity.

22 Guess: Ask the students who they think is the third person who has accused Charles Darnay at the end of Chapter 19. Ask them to justify their answers.

Chapters 20–21

After reading

23 Discuss: Put the students into groups of four. Have them discuss the following question: What plan do you think Carton has to save Darnay? After ten or fifteen minutes, ask the groups to present their ideas to the rest of the class.

Chapters 22–27

After reading

24 Discuss: Revenge is sweet.
After they have read Chapters 22 and 23, put the students into groups of four and have them think about the following questions: Do you understand the reaction of the crowd on page 103 after Dr Manette’s letter is read out in court? How would you feel if you were in the crowd at that moment? Do you understand why Madame Defarge is so full of hatred for the Evrémonde family? How do you think you would feel if you were in her place? After ten or fifteen minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole group. Write some of their ideas on the board.

25 Pair work: Give the students a few minutes to consider how Jarvis Lorry must have felt when the coach carrying him, Lucie, Charles and their child is stopped at the gates of Paris. Put the students into pairs and tell them to act out the dialogue between Mr Lorry and the guard.

26 Debate: Put the students into pairs and ask them to consider their answers to the following question: Do you agree with the assertion made by Jacques Three on page 118 that a good Republican should not feel sorry for such people like Doctor Manette? After ten minutes or so, ask one of the pairs to volunteer their opinions and invite the rest of the group to react to it. Continue for as long as the group remains interested in the topic.

27 Discuss: Sydney Carton goes to the guillotine convinced that ‘it is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done.’ Ask the students how they feel about the following question: Did Darnay deserve Carton’s sacrifice? Give them a few minutes to jot down their ideas and then put them into groups of four to discuss and exchange their views. At the end of the exercise, ask one or two of the groups to sum up their views in front of the whole class.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.