



A Critical Analysis of 'A Tale of Two Cities' By Charles Dickens

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ABSTRACT

With its famous opening line "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times," A Tale of Two Cities was plainly intended by Dickens as a study in dramatic contrasts. Clear-cut polarities furnish this story of individuals caught in the maelstrom of the French Revolution with its central dynamic. Portraying events that take place over nearly two decades, the novel's setting shifts from the repression of autocratic rule and the impassioned violence it unleashes in Paris to the rule of law and the humane concern in London as a (temporarily) safe haven. The author's over-arching message arises in the context of sharp contrasts between chaos and order, light and dark, hope and despair, heaven and hell.

KEYWORDS:

Dickens, Dramatic, Character

INTRODUCTION



This is a work that is essentially devoid of all ambiguity, one in which the good characters are without moral blemish, while the evil ones are without redeeming qualities. But *A Tale of Two Cities* is also open-ended.

Its uplifting outcome pivots upon miracles of personal resurrection and self-sacrifice, as the author insists that nothing short of spiritual renewal can prevent his own society from suffering the type of upheaval that erupted across the English Channel at the end of the eighteenth century. The theme of duality is manifest in Dickens's recourse to the device of twinned characters. Charles Darnay's father and his uncle are, of course, biological twins, and the elder St. Evermondes are indistinguishable in their haughty cruelty. It is, however, the close physical resemblance between Darnay and the world-weary lawyer Sidney Carton that the author exploits to the utmost. Unjustly accused of treason, Darnay's case in London appears to be lost until his attorney, Mr. Stryker, discredits the testimony of an eyewitness by challenging him to discriminate between the defendant and Carton.

The uncanny physical likeness between the two men surfaces again in the novel's concluding chapters, when Carton substitutes himself for Darnay as a victim of revolutionary justice in France. As personalities, Carton is plainly the more complicated of the two and he is far more competent than his well-intentioned but consistently ineffective counterpart. Yet both men



are in love with the exceedingly pure Lucy Manette, a saintly figure whose goodness matches that of Darnay and, at the same time, has the power to transmute Carton from a cynic into a self-sacrificing idealist.

In the first of the novel's three sections, we learn that Darnay's father and uncle were responsible for the imprisonment of Dr. Manette, and we see the fruits of despotism in his wasted, spectral figure. But it is not until Book Two that Dickens gives us a first-hand example of the callous indifference that the French aristocracy has adopted toward the common people.

When the gilded carriage of the Marquis St. Evermonde tramples Gaspard's child, leaving behind a tossed gold coin in its wake, it is apparent that the rule of the great lords is directly responsible for misery that the peasants and workmen of France have suffered for so long. We later learn that Madame DeFarge's entire family has been raped or murdered by the Evermondes, and that these crimes are characteristic of the entire class of aristocrats.

Despite the evident injustices, Dickens depicts the French Revolution of Book Three in elemental terms, as a storm driven by a passion for revenge. It is not social injustice of the ancient regime, but individual barbarity, which Dickens assaults. Indeed, an intemperate urge for revenge is presented by the author as being as evil as the indifference of the



aristocrats to the miseries that they have inflicted. Arguably, the work's central villain is not Darnay's uncle, but his chief accuser, Madame DeFarge.

Charles Dickens' twelfth novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, was written to show all of the good and evil that was present during the French Revolution. He uses the two main cities, London and Paris, to represent this, and then ties in a love story with many different symbols of good and evil such as Darnay and Carton, Madame Defarge and Miss Pross. In his novel, Dickens also shows both sides of the revolution with the peasants and the aristocracy. He expresses how they are both evil although the peasants are the people who we would be accustomed to feel pity for.

The peasants are constantly trying to revolt against the higher-ups for revenge for their treatment. On the love side, Lucie and Darnay would have lived happily ever after had Madame Defarge not had Darnay charged and sentenced to death for revenge of her slain family by Darnay's family. Madame Defarge's best friend's name is even *The Vengeance*, which shows how vengeful that particular group of peasants really was.

Madame Defarge says, "Let me but lift my finger! She seemed to raise it, and to let it fall with a rattle on the ledge before her (Lucie), as if the axe had dropped". She will not stop and be satisfied with the death of the last member of the family who killed her family; she vows to get Lucie also.



When she attempts to carry out her promise, she loses her life in a tussle with Miss Pross; her incurable desire for revenge brought her own death upon her. Imprisonment is another obvious theme within the novel. Dickens begins his novel with Doctor Manette being finally released from his imprisonment. Darnay is also later imprisoned many times, and is eventually sentenced to the fate of the Guillotine.

ANALYSIS OF 'A TALE OF TWO CITIES' BY CHARLES DICKENS

The central paradox of *A Tale of Two Cities* is that its action involves one of the most important political events of modern European history—and perhaps of its entire history—the French Revolution, while the values of the novel are ultimately antipolitical. Politics and history, neither of which Charles Dickens renders with great faithfulness, loom as a necessity from which his characters must flee to save their souls. Throughout the novel, Dickens reminds his readers that all acts, whether magnanimous or petty, shrink to nothing when viewed in a cosmic context. Indeed, for him, the goal of politics—the finding of a just community—is an absurd one in this world. To paraphrase Sydney Carton’s famous last speech: It is a far better thing to die and join such a community in heaven—the existence of which Dickens cannot with certainty assert—than to engage with society.



A Tale of Two Cities demonstrates that Dickens's political will, wan in his previous novels, is finally exhausted.

In this regard and in one of the first substantial essays dealing with Dickens's art and thought, published a year before *A Tale of Two Cities* was completed, Walter Bagehot said, Mr. Dickens has not infrequently spoken, and what is worse, he has taught a great number of parrot-like imitators to speak, in what really is, if they knew it, a tone of objection to the necessary constitution of human society.

Dickens's strength, Bagehot agreed, appears in the quality of his moral cry, his protest against the injustices of society; yet, as he said, the novelist never indicates how these inequalities might be removed.

By the time of *A Tale of Two Cities*, distinguished by its outrage against the tyranny of both the governors and the governed, Dickens clearly indicates that society cannot be made to progress or even be substantially ameliorated. For him, the great grasp for freedom by the French people, for example, goes finally unsung, drowned out by the terrible cacophony of the guillotine. To Dickens's unwillingness to accept the "necessary constitution of human society," then, must be added his refusal to understand and accept the necessarily slow and painful processes of history.



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Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" is a complex novel that requires literary analysis to fully appreciate its power. Through analysis, we can



see important themes emerge such as resurrection, the relationship of the individual to society, and the interplay of darkness and light.

What elevates a novel to the level of 'classic literature'? This is an eternal question that has no clear answer, but it is clear that a classic is a work whose complexity allows generations of readers to dig into it and find it rewarding. Given its popularity ever since it was published in 1859, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* definitely fits this description.

The act of digging and engaging with a work of literature, as opposed to just letting the story mindlessly wash over you, is called literary analysis. It is the process of asking questions about the text that allow you to appreciate its complexity. One common goal of analysis is to look at how the novel portrays its theme, or main idea or argument.

DISCUSSION

A complex work like *A Tale of Two Cities* has many themes, more than we have time to get into here, but there are a few big ones that stick out. These include the possibility of resurrection, the relationship of the individual and society, and the interplay of darkness and light.

In Christian countries, including Dickens' England, the idea of resurrection can hold great meaning. One of the core tenets of Christianity is the belief in Jesus' physical resurrection and belief that individuals are



capable of more spiritual or metaphorical types of resurrection and rebirth is central to most Christian thinking.

Dickens makes use of this idea throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*, showing the ways in which characters can be reborn. It starts with Dr. Manette, who after 18 years in prison has no memory of who he was, thinking himself to be a shoemaker. But through the love of his daughter Lucie, Manette is resurrected into the man he was before prison.

And two metaphorical resurrections also end the novel. When Sydney Carton takes the place of his lookalike Charles Darnay at the guillotine, both men are reborn in different ways. Darnay is allowed to live, continuing to care for his family with Lucie. And Carton, though he physically dies, is spiritually reborn because he has given his life purpose and will be remembered for his sacrifice.

Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' has enchanted readers and critics for generations, inspiring endless amounts of literary criticism. Critics have examined the novel from historical, formalist, and feminist angles.

Charles Dickens' 1859 novel ***A Tale of Two Cities***, a sweeping story about characters who get wrapped up in the French Revolution in the last decades of the 18th century, is one of the most popular and enduring novels ever written. It has been popular since the time it was published and is one of Dickens' most-read and widely taught works today.



Like any great work of literature, *A Tale of Two Cities* has inspired endless analysis and debate. The act of analyzing and interpreting a work of literature is known as **literary criticism**. But what is the 'right' interpretation of *A Tale of Two Cities*? There is no totally correct interpretation as great works of literature are rich enough to allow for multiple perspectives.

It is best to think of literary criticism as an ongoing and endless argument. A critic makes a claim about the text, supporting it with evidence and reasoning, and other critics respond with their own interpretations. Often, critics will fall into a group that, while not always in total agreement, does agree on certain ways to approach a work of literature.

Three of these groups who have discussed *A Tale of Two Cities* are historical critics, formalist critics, and feminist critics.

Historical critics are defined by their interest in the historical context which the work was written. They examine how this context affected the writing of the book and the ideas presented within it.

A Tale of Two Cities presents an interesting challenge to historical critics because, as a work of historical fiction, it involves two different time periods. The book was written in London in 1859 but it depicts events happening in London and Paris between the years 1775-1792.



Some historical critics have examined the accuracy of Dickens' portrayal of the French Revolution and his use of historical sources, such as Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*. Others have examined how Dickens uses the French Revolution to comment on problems in his own time, pointing out that the problems of inequality that caused the Revolution are still present.

Other historical critics have analyzed how the novel, while set in the 18th century, is indicative of the 19th century Victorian culture which Dickens was a part. They point out the heavy Christian symbolism in the book's recurring theme of resurrection and how it reflects the period's religious views. They point out that Lucie Manette, beautiful and completely selfless, embodied Victorian ideals about women.

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CONCLUSION

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