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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

CHARLES DICKENS

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an overview of key themes, and more

A TALE OF TWO CITIES



Charles Dickens

*Supplementary material written by Keith Cox
Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson*

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INTRODUCTION

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: AN INDELIBLE VISION OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Impassive French women knitting beside the guillotine. The demonic roars of the crowd as the executioner holds a severed head in the air. The streets running with wine . . . and, later, blood. These are the pictures most people in the English-speaking world call to mind when asked about the French Revolution—pictures crafted by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), without a doubt the most influential novel ever written about the French Revolution. In fact, with the exception of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, there is probably no other novel written in English that has so completely crystallized a historical period in the mind of the public.

A Tale of Two Cities is unlike most other Dickens novels. The author's trademark humor is noticeably absent. Instead, Dickens presents a moving, often chilling, story of London and Paris in the years between 1775 and 1794. His implication throughout the novel is that the great European capitals are twin sisters at the core and that the excesses of the French Revolution are not impossible to imagine happening on British soil. Social unrest in England throughout the 1840s gave Dickens justifiable reason to believe that

revolution was a possibility, and his belief gives the novel a palpable sense of urgency.

A Tale of Two Cities is a story of love, loyalty, duty, revenge, and sacrifice. Such powerful material made the novel itself extremely popular, and also furnished inspiration for future novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers. Numerous novels after Dickens's made use of his imagery, and the story has been presented in dozens of different stage and film productions. From its famous first line to its equally famous last, *A Tale of Two Cities* is an unforgettable work of fiction that set the standard for all historical novels that followed.

The Life and Work of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, to Elizabeth and John Dickens. He had a happy, middle-class childhood, but his father's financial mismanagement plunged the family into debt. In 1824, John Dickens was thrown into debtor's prison. Charles was subsequently withdrawn from school, an arena in which he flourished, and put to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, an occupation in which he withered. This change occurred on Charles's twelfth birthday and lasted six months until his family could afford to return him to school. The irony of this "birthday gift" left a deep mark on Dickens's psyche. He often returned to this period of his life in his later writings, and always wrote of it with bitter energy. The evils of child labor and the fragility of financial and social security became his frequent themes.

After returning to school, Dickens distinguished himself as a bright student. He took to the writing profession early in his career and by age seventeen was a court reporter for various legal offices in London. His work gave him firsthand experience of the courts of England, which would later prove to be fertile material for his works of fiction. In 1833, at the age of twenty-one, Dickens saw his first story pub-

lished in *Monthly Magazine*. Not long thereafter, he wrote *Sketches by Boz*. He began to attract attention as a young and capable writer, and was approached by *The Times* to write a serial piece centered around humorous sporting scenes. Dickens transformed the initial concept into what would become *The Pickwick Papers*, a work that established him as a master of literary comedy and earned him a considerable amount of fame. Dickens's next work, *Oliver Twist*, cemented his status as a serious author. This classic story of an orphan boy searching for a place where he can belong gained national attention for its depiction of the brutal conditions in London orphanages. Dickens quickly became one of England's premier literary figures. He continued publishing novels serially while also editing and contributing to various journals. By 1859, when *A Tale of Two Cities* was published serially, Dickens was England's most famous living writer. He used his fame to help launch *All the Year Round*, a journal that he founded and edited, by enticing readers to the initial issues of the journal with the promise of his latest novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, a daughter of a colleague at the *Morning Chronicle*, in 1836, just as his successes were beginning. Although they had ten children together, their union was unhappy. As *A Tale of Two Cities* was being written, they separated at Dickens's initiation. London was filled with rumors about their domestic problems and Dickens's suspected love affair with a young actress named Ellen Ternan. His marital troubles, though, did not diminish his reputation, and *A Tale of Two Cities* was widely read.

By the 1860s, Dickens had already begun giving public readings of his own work. At the outset, the readings were single evening events, but he soon embarked on reading tours of England. Their popularity only further developed Dickens's relationship with the public. In 1867, Dickens brought his reading tour to America and was met with an incredible reception. In Boston, for instance, there were

reports of Dickens devotees waiting hours outside the theater to ensure getting a seat at his reading. It was not until the Beatles "invaded" America a century later that an Englishman would again receive such a reception from an American audience. However, as Dickens's health began to decline, his reading tours became less frequent, and he gave his final reading in 1870. That year, the last year of his life, he started the serial publication of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* but did not live to complete the work. Within days of his death, *The Times* called for his burial at Westminster Abbey and the dean of Westminster concurred.

Historical and Literary Context of *A Tale of Two Cities*

Revolutions and Unrest

Revolutions form the backdrop of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The action in the novel is framed by the bloody revolutions of the late eighteenth century in America and France. The two revolutions had much to do with each other. American revolutionaries were inspired by the French political and philosophical writings about the rights of man and the desirability of a democratic government. The war for American independence broke out in 1775 (the year in which *A Tale of Two Cities* begins) and had almost reached a stalemate when assistance from France arrived in 1777. The war lasted four more years before, with the help of the French navy, it ended with the British surrender at Yorktown. In 1783, the Treaty of Paris recognized the United States of America, a country founded on the principles of liberty and democracy.

The success of the young country fired the imaginations of progressives in France who were eager to establish a similarly representative government at home. France's privileged classes—the clergy and the nobility—governed the

country, while the productive class—the third estate—was heavily taxed to foot the bill. Outdated farming methods created food shortages, while the extravagance in the court of King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, sparked outrage. The king was forced to order a general election of popular representatives, who met in 1789 to present him with their complaints but wound up declaring themselves to be the National Assembly and vowing not to adjourn until a constitution had been written. Violence erupted as frustrated peasants lashed out at the ruling classes, forcing the nobility to abolish the feudal system and accept the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. By 1791, a limited constitutional monarchy was created, but the revolution was far from over. “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” was the rallying cry as the National Assembly suspended the king and called for new elections to create a convention to draw up a new constitution. In 1792, the new assembly abolished the monarchy and arrested, convicted, and executed the king for treason. Internal power struggles led to the creation not of a democracy but of a war dictatorship that tried to maintain order by executing everyone it considered a threat. In the span of about a year, from 1793 to 1794, thousands, including the queen, lost their heads to the guillotine in a period known as the Reign of Terror.

At the time *A Tale of Two Cities* was published, England was in the midst of the industrial revolution. Technological innovations had shifted the basis of England’s economy from agriculture to industry between 1750 and 1850. The development of steam power and a boom in the cotton textiles industry caused a population shift from rural to urban areas. New steam-powered railroads and ships broadened the market for England’s output. Laborers were more at the mercy of their employers than ever before, and working conditions in factories, mines, and mills were often brutal. Children and adults alike commonly worked as much as sixteen hours a day, six days a week, in dangerous conditions for very small wages. Throughout the nineteenth century, most of the

western world struggled to adjust to the impact of industrialization.

England went through particularly severe growing pains during the 1830s and 1840s. The revolutionary fever that seized France had a chastening influence in England, and the ruling class made some concessions to the demands of the working people. In 1832, the Reform Bill was passed, which broadened voting rights to include most property-owning males. But this reform did not address the country's more pressing social and political problems. An economic depression in the early 1840s led to widespread unemployment and riots. Between 1845 and 1850, the years of the famous potato famine, about a million Irish men, women, and children died of starvation. Working conditions in coal mines and factories were a national scandal. Political groups such as the Chartists agitated for social reform and gave frequent, fiery speeches in front of hungry, angry mobs. With the memory of the French Revolution still very fresh in their minds, Dickens and other writers (like his friend Thomas Carlyle, author of a history book published in 1837 called *The French Revolution*, which Dickens used for source material) were quick to draw parallels between France of the 1780s and England of the 1850s.

The Power of the Reading Public

Literacy among working-class English people was on the rise during the nineteenth century. There are no official records of national literacy per se, but various types of records indicate that in the 1830s about two-thirds to three-fourths of the working classes could read. By the 1870s, an examination of British sailors and marines showed literacy rates of about ninety percent, which would seem to indicate a very high literacy rate among the general population. As the size of the working-class readership swelled, writers like Charles Dickens emerged to satisfy their tastes with a rela-

tively new type of literature—the novel—presented in a new medium: the mass-circulation magazine.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the novel, as we know it, did not exist. Aristocratic readers preferred poetry, philosophical works, and essays, and books of these sorts were printed in small numbers in fine editions at great expense. Aside from Bibles, books were not common possessions for common people. The novel, as its name suggests, was something new—a long, fictional story written in prose. Novels were stories that played on the emotions of the readers. As such, they were often dismissed as sentimental trash by the elitist critics of the early nineteenth century, many of whom pointed to the popularity of novels as proof of the downfall of civilization. Scholars usually name Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as the first novel written in English. Within one hundred years of the publication of this highly popular book, novel writing was in full flower.

What distinguishes most novelists of the eighteenth century, such as *Tom Jones* author Henry Fielding, from most novelists of the nineteenth century, such as Dickens and his contemporary William Makepeace Thackeray, was that Dickens and Thackeray and authors like them were professionals who made their living by writing. Writers of earlier generations were often members of the nobility or had other professional pursuits through which they made the bulk of their earnings. Writers like Dickens found large profits and wide readership through a practice called serial publication. Cheaper printing and paper costs had caused a boom in the publication of inexpensive magazines—the so-called penny press, since a copy of such a magazine cost only a penny. These magazines published periodic installments of new novels. After the last installment was published, the novel might be released in complete and bound form for sale. Even readers of modest means could afford to buy the magazine installments, and thousands willingly lined up each month for the newest episode in the latest Dickens story.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES



CHRONOLOGY OF CHARLES DICKENS'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1812: Born February 7 to John and Elizabeth Dickens at Landport, Hampshire.
- 1815: Family moves to London.
- 1817: Begins education in Chatham, Kent.
- 1824: John Dickens put in Marshalsea debtor's prison. (February) Charles taken out of school and put to work in Warren's blacking warehouse. (June) Charles returns to school.
- 1827: Learns shorthand while employed as solicitor's clerk.
- 1829: Begins work as free-lance court reporter.
- 1833: First story published in the *Old Monthly Magazine*.
- 1834: While working as reporter *Sketches by Boz* published serially.
- 1836: (April) *Pickwick Papers* published serially (completed November 1837). Marries Catherine Hogarth.
- 1837: First child of ten is born. Publication of *Oliver Twist* begins (completed April 1839). Mary Hogarth, sister-in-law, dies.

- 1838: (April) *Nicolas Nickleby* published serially (completed in October 1839).
- 1842: *Travels in North America with family. American Notes* published.
- 1843: *A Christmas Carol* published.
- 1844: *The Chimes* published.
- 1845: *The Cricket on the Hearth* published.
- 1846: *Daily News* begins publication with Dickens in editorial role. (October) *Dombey and Son* begins serial publication (completed April 1848). *The Battle of Life* published.
- 1848: *The Haunted Man* published.
- 1849: (May) Monthly installments of *David Copperfield* begin (completed November 1850).
- 1850: Starts weekly journal *Household Words*, edits and contributes.
- 1852: (March) *Bleak House* begins serial publication (completed September 1853).
- 1854: *Hard Times* published serially.
- 1855: (December) *Little Dorrit* published serially (completed June 1857).
- 1858: Begins public readings. Separates from his wife, Catherine.
- 1859: *A Tale of Two Cities* published serially. *All the Year Round*, a weekly magazine, launched as publication of *Household Words* ends.
- 1860: *The Uncommercial Traveler* published. *Great Expectations* published serially.
- 1864: (May) *Our Mutual Friend* published serially (completed November 1865).
- 1867: (December) Begins American public reading tour.
- 1869: After stroke, provincial reading tour halted.
- 1870: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* begins serial publication. June 8 suffers stroke and dies June 9. Buried at Westminster Abbey on June 14.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *A Tale of Two Cities*



- 1757: Attempt on the life of Louis XV.
- 1760: George III crowned King of England.
- 1762: Publication of Rousseau's *Du contrat social*.
- 1763: France and England sign treaty ending the French Indian War. Canada and land east of the Mississippi added to British Empire.
- 1765: Parliament passes Stamp Act to pay costs of British troops in American frontier. American colonies violently protest measure.
- 1770: French deficits continue to rise. Boston Massacre occurs.
- 1774: Louis XVI becomes King of France.
- 1776: American colonies ratify Declaration of Independence.
- 1778: France signs alliance with American colonies.
- 1783: Peace of Paris ends conflict between France, American colonies, and Britain.
- 1787: Exile of *parlement* of Paris.
- 1788: *Parlement* restored.
- 1789: Estates-General meet at Versailles. Louis XVI

- closes meeting. Estates-General meet at the Louvre tennis courts. Bastille stormed. Rights of feudalism abolished. Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen. Church property nationalized. First wave of aristocratic emigration begins.
- 1790: Titles of nobility abolished.
- 1791: Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette attempt to leave France in disguise but are apprehended. New French Constitution accepted by Louis XVI.
- 1792: Paris mob storms Tuileries Palace and establishes new city government. National Assembly meets, ends monarchy, tries Louis XVI for treason. He is convicted by a majority of one vote. France declares war on Austria. Prussia declares war on France.
- 1793: Louis XVI executed. Reign of Terror begins. Marie Antoinette executed. France declares war on Britain, Spain, and Holland. Marat assassinated.
- 1794: Robespierre guillotined. Jacobin club closed.
- 1795: Napoleon promoted to major-general in French army.

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