

## Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Nance Heckman	School:	Olentangy Liberty High
Book Title:	A Tale of Two Cities	Genre:	Fiction
Author:	Charles Dickens	Pages:	Whole work
Publisher:	Signet Classics	Copyright:	2007

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

THE YEAR IS 1775, and social ills plague both France and England. Jerry Cruncher, an odd-job-man who works for Tellson's Bank, stops the Dover mail-coach with an urgent message for Jarvis Lorry. The message instructs Lorry to wait at Dover for a young woman, and Lorry responds with the cryptic words, "Recalled to Life." At Dover, Lorry is met by Lucie Manette, a young orphan whose father, a once-eminant doctor whom she supposed dead, has been discovered in France. Lorry escorts Lucie to Paris, where they meet Defarge, a former servant of Doctor Manette, who has kept Manette safe in a garret. Driven mad by eighteen years in the Bastille, Manette spends all of his time making shoes, a hobby he learned while in prison. Lorry assures Lucie that her love and devotion can recall her father to life, and indeed they do.

The year is now 1780. Charles Darnay stands accused of treason against the English crown. A bombastic lawyer named Stryver pleads Darnay's case, but it is not until his drunk, good-for-nothing colleague, Sydney Carton, assists him that the court acquits Darnay. Carton clinches his argument by pointing out that he himself bears an uncanny resemblance to the defendant, which undermines the prosecution's case for unmistakably identifying Darnay as the spy the authorities spotted. Lucie and Doctor Manette watched the court proceedings, and that night, Carton escorts Darnay to a tavern and asks how it feels to receive the sympathy of a woman like Lucie. Carton despises and resents Darnay because he reminds him of all that he himself has given up and might have been.

In France, the cruel Marquis Evrémonte runs down a plebian child with his carriage. Manifesting an attitude typical of the aristocracy in regard to the poor at that time, the Marquis shows no regret, but instead curses the peasantry and hurries home to his chateau, where he awaits the arrival of his nephew, Darnay, from England. Arriving later that night, Darnay curses his uncle and the French aristocracy for its abominable treatment of the people. He renounces his identity as an Evrémonte

and announces his intention to return to England. That night, the Marquis is murdered; the murderer has left a note signed with the nickname adopted by French revolutionaries: "Jacques."

A year passes, and Darnay asks Manette for permission to marry Lucie. He says that, if Lucie accepts, he will reveal his true identity to Manette. Carton, meanwhile, also pledges his love to Lucie, admitting that, though his life is worthless, she has helped him dream of a better, more valuable existence. On the streets of London, Jerry Cruncher gets swept up in the funeral procession for a spy named Roger Cly. Later that night, he demonstrates his talents as a "Resurrection-Man," sneaking into the cemetery to steal and sell Cly's body. In Paris, meanwhile, another English spy known as John Barsad drops into Defarge's wine-shop. Barsad hopes to turn up evidence concerning the mounting revolution, which is still in its covert stages. Madame Defarge sits in the shop knitting a secret registry of those whom the revolution seeks to execute. Back in London, Darnay, on the morning of his wedding, keeps his promise to Manette; he reveals his true identity and, that night, Manette relapses into his old prison habit of making shoes. After nine days, Manette regains his presence of mind, and soon joins the newlyweds on their honeymoon. Upon Darnay's return, Carton pays him a visit and asks for his friendship. Darnay assures Carton that he is always welcome in their home.

The year is now 1789. The peasants in Paris storm the Bastille and the French Revolution begins. The revolutionaries murder aristocrats in the streets, and Gabelle, a man charged with the maintenance of the Evrémont estate, is imprisoned. Three years later, he writes to Darnay, asking to be rescued. Despite the threat of great danger to his person, Darnay departs immediately for France.

As soon as Darnay arrives in Paris, the French revolutionaries arrest him as an emigrant. Lucie and Manette make their way to Paris in hopes of saving him. Darnay remains in prison for a year and three months before receiving a trial. In order to help free him, Manette uses his considerable influence with the revolutionaries, who sympathize with him for having served time in the Bastille. Darnay receives an acquittal, but that same night he is arrested again. The charges, this time, come from Defarge and his vengeful wife. Carton arrives in Paris with a plan to rescue Darnay and obtains the help of John Barsad, who turns out to be Solomon Pross, the long-lost brother of Miss Pross, Lucie's loyal servant.

At Darnay's trial, Defarge produces a letter that he discovered in Manette's old jail cell in the Bastille. The letter explains the cause of Manette's imprisonment. Years ago, the brothers Evrémont (Darnay's father and uncle) enlisted Manette's medical assistance. They asked him to tend to a woman, whom one of the brothers had raped, and her brother, whom the same brother had stabbed fatally. Fearing that Manette might report their misdeeds, the Evrémonts had him arrested. Upon hearing this story, the jury condemns Darnay for the crimes of his ancestors and sentences him to die within twenty-four hours. That night, at the Defarge's wine-shop, Carton overhears Madame Defarge plotting to have Lucie and her daughter (also Darnay's daughter) executed as well; Madame Defarge, it turns out, is the surviving sibling of the man and woman killed by the Evrémonts. Carton arranges for the Manettes' immediate departure from France. He then visits Darnay in prison, tricks him into changing clothes with him, and, after dictating a letter of explanation, drugs his friend unconscious. Barsad carries Darnay, now disguised as Carton, to an

awaiting coach, while Carton, disguised as Darnay, awaits execution. As Darnay, Lucie, their child, and Dr. Manette speed away from Paris, Madame Defarge arrives at Lucie's apartment, hoping to arrest her. There she finds the supremely protective Miss Pross. A scuffle ensues, and Madame Defarge dies by the bullet of her own gun. Sydney Carton meets his death at the guillotine, and the narrator confidently asserts that Carton dies with the knowledge that he has finally imbued his life with meaning

Phillips, Brian and Hopson, David. SparkNote on A Tale of Two Cities. 10 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/twocities/>>.

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

From AP European History Map  
Political and Diplomatic History

Critique the evolution of political elites and the development of political ideologies and parties.

Assess the extension and limitation of rights & liberties (personal, civic, economic, and political); majority and minority political persecutions.

Compare forms of political protest, reform and revolution.

Deduce war and civil conflicts; the origin, technology, development, values and political events.

Cultural and Intellectual History

Evaluate developments in social, economic, political thought, literacy, education and communication.

Assess the changes in elite & popular culture, such as the development of attitudes toward religion, the family, work and rituals.

Social and Economic History

Evaluate changes in the demographic structure of Europe, their causes and consequences including: gender roles, social structures, development of ethnic and racial group identities, and the family.

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

See Attached.

Review #2

See Attached.

**What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

<u>Title:</u> <b>The Scarlet Pimpernel</b>	<u>Author:</u> <b>Baroness Emmuska Orczy</b>
<u>Title:</u>	<u>Author:</u>

**Document any potentially controversial content:**

1. This classic Dickens novel was written in the age revolution in France (1700s) and there are references to violence and bloodshed. However, it is a historical fiction novel and is only written in the context of historical events.

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated    Regular    At Risk

**GRADE LEVEL(S):**            6            7            8            9            10            11            12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):**

**Date Submitted to Department Chair:** October 10, 2007

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

- School Library Journal
- Horn Book
- Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books
- VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)
- Library Journal
- Book Links
- Publisher's Weekly
- Booklist
- Kirkus Review
- Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults

# A Tale of Two Cities

Table of Contents: [Essay](#)

"A *Tale of Two Cities*," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, edited by Gross and Gabriel Pearson, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. 187-97

[In the following excerpt, Gross parallels the lives of the **two** heroes in the novel, Carton and Darnay. ]

A *Tale of Two Cities* is a **tale** of **two** heroes. The theme of the double has such obvious attractions for a writer preoccupied with disguises, rival impulses, and hidden affinities that it is surprising that Dickens didn't make more use of it elsewhere. But no one could claim that his handling of the device is very successful here, or that he has managed to range the significant forces of the novel behind Carton and Darnay. Darnay is, so to speak, the accredited representative of Dickens in the novel, the 'normal' hero for whom a happy ending is still possible. It has been noted, interestingly enough, that he shares his creator's initials—and that is pretty well the only interesting thing about him. Otherwise he is a pasteboard character, completely undeveloped. His position **as** an exile, his struggles **as** a language-teacher, his admiration for George Washington are so many openings thrown away.

Carton, of course, is a far more striking figure. He belongs to the line of cultivated wastrels who play an increasingly large part in Dickens's novels during the second half of his career, culminating in Eugene Wrayburn. He has squandered his gifts and drunk away his early promise; his will is broken, but his intellect is unimpaired. In a sense, his opposite is not Darnay at all, but the aggressive Stryver, who makes a fortune by picking his brains. Yet there is something hollow about his complete resignation to failure: his self-abasement in front of Lucie, for instance. ('I am like one who died young ... I know very well that you can have no tenderness for me ... ') For, stagy a figure though he is, Carton does suggest what Thomas Hardy calls 'fearful unfulfillments'; he still has vitality, and it is hard to believe that he has gone down without a struggle. The total effect is one of energy held unnaturally in check: the bottled-up frustration which Carton represents must spill over somewhere.

Carton's and Darnay's fates are entwined from their first meeting, at the Old Bailey trial. Over the dock there hangs a mirror: 'crowds of the wicked and the wretched had been reflected in it, and had passed from its surface and this earth's together. Haunted in a most ghastly manner that abominable place would have been, if the glass could ever have rendered back its reflections, **as** the ocean is one day to give up its dead.' After Darnay's acquittal we leave him with Carton, 'so like each other in feature, so unlike in manner, both reflected in the glass above them'. Reflections, like ghosts, suggest unreality and self-division, and at the end of the same day Carton stares at his own image in the glass and upbraids it: 'Why should you particularly like a man who resembles you? There is nothing in you to like: you know that. Ah, confound you! ... Come on, and have it out in plain words! You hate the fellow.'

In front of the mirror, Carton thinks of changing places with Darnay; at the end of the book, he is to take the other's death upon him. Dickens prepares the ground: when Darnay is in jail, it is Carton who strikes Mr. Lorry **as** having 'the wasted air of a prisoner', and when he is visited by Carton on the rescue attempt, he thinks at first that he is 'an apparition of his own imagining'. But Dickens is determined to stick by Darnay: a happy ending *must* be possible. **As** Lorry and his party gallop to safety with the drugged Darnay, there is an abrupt switch to the first person: 'The wind is rushing after us, and the clouds are flying after us, and the moon is plunging after us, and the whole wild night is in pursuit of us; but so far, we are pursued by nothing else.' *We* can make our escape, however narrowly; Carton, expelled from our system, must be abandoned to his fate.

But the last word is with Carton—the most famous last word in Dickens, in fact. Those who take a simplified view of Dickens's radicalism, or regard him **as** one of nature's Marxists, can hardly help regretting that *A Tale of Two Cities* should end **as** it does. They are bound to feel, with Edgar Johnson, that 'instead of merging, the truth of revolution and the truth of sacrifice are made to appear in conflict'. A highly personal, indeed a unique crisis cuts across public issues and muffles the political message. But this is both to sentimentalize Dickens's view of the revolution, and to miss the point about Carton. The cynical judgment that his sacrifice was trifling, since he had nothing to live for, is somewhat nearer the mark. Drained of the will to live, he is shown in the closing chapters of the book **as** a man courting death, and embracing it when it comes. 'In seasons of pestilence, some of us will have a secret attraction to

the disease—a terrible passing inclination to die of it. And all of us have like wonders hidden in our breasts, only needing circumstances to evoke them.' It is Carton rather than Darnay who is 'drawn to the loadstone rock.' On his last walk around Paris, his thoughts run on religion: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' But his impressions are all of death: the day comes coldly, 'looking like a dead face out of the sky', while on the river 'a trading boat, with a sail of the softened colour of a dead leaf, then glided into his view, floated by him, and died away'. His walk recalls an earlier night, when he wandered round London with 'wreaths of dust spinning round and round before the morning blast, **as** if the desert sand had risen far away and the first spray of it in its advance had begun to overwhelm the **city**'. Then, with the wilderness bringing home to him a sense of the wasted powers within him, he saw a momentary mirage of what he might have achieved and was reduced to tears; but now that the **city** has been overwhelmed in earnest, he is past thinking of what might have been. 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done'—but the 'better thing' might just **as** well be committing suicide **as** laying down his life for Darnay. At any rate, he thinks of himself **as** going towards rest, not towards resurrection.

By this time the revolution has become simply the agency of death, the storm that overwhelms the **city**. Or rather, all the pent-up fury and resentment that is allowed no outlet in the 'personal' side of the book, with Carton kow-towing to Stryver and nobly renouncing Lucie, boils over in revolutionary violence: Dickens dances the Carmagnole, and howls for blood with the mob. Frightened by the forces which he has released, he views the revolution with hatred and disgust; he doesn't record a single incident in which it might be shown **as** beneficent, constructive or even tragic. Instead, it is described time and again in terms of pestilence and madness. Dickens will hear nothing of noble aspirations; the disorder of the whole period is embodied in the dervishes who dance the Carmagnole—'no fight could have been half so terrible'. Confronted with the crowd, Dickens reaches for his gun; he looks into eyes 'which any unbrutalized beholder would have given twenty years of life, to have petrified with a well-directed gun'. That 'well-directed' has the true ring of outraged rate-paying respectability, while the image seems oddly out of place in a book which has laid so much stress on the stony faces and petrified hearts of the aristocracy.

Dickens can only deal with mob-violence in a deliberately picturesque story set in the past. But *A Tale of Two Cities*, written by a middle-aged man who could afford a longer perspective at a time when Chartism was already receding into history, is not quite analogous to *Barnaby Rudge*. There, however contemptible we are meant to find the world of Sir John Chester, the riots are an explosion of madness and nothing more. But the French Revolution compels Dickens to acquire a theory of history, however primitive: 'crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms'. The revolutionaries return evil for evil; the guillotine is the product not of innate depravity but of intolerable oppression. If Dickens's sympathies shift towards the aristocrats **as** soon **as** they become victims, he can also show a grim restraint; he underlines the horror of Foulon's death, strung up with a bunch of grass tied to his back (how his imagination pounces on such a detail!), but he never allows us to forget who Foulon was. Nor does he have any sympathy with those who talk of the Revolution 'as though it were the only harvest under the skies that had never been sown', although he himself is at times plainly tempted to treat it **as** an inexplicable calamity, a rising of the sea (the gaoler at La Force has the bloated body of a drowned man, and so forth) or a rising of fire: the flames which destroy the chateau of St. Evrémonde 'blow from the infernal regions', convulsing nature until the lead boils over inside the stone fountains. But cause and effect are never kept out of sight for long; Dickens is always reminding himself that the Revolution, though 'a frightful moral disorder', was born of 'unspeakable suffering, intolerable oppression, and heartless indifference'. Society was diseased before the fever broke out: the shattered cask of wine which at the outset falls on the 'crippling' stones of Saint Antoine is scooped up in little mugs of 'mutilated' earthenware.

But to grasp a patient's medical history is not to condone his disease, and Dickens is unyielding in his hostility to the crowd. The buzzing of the flies on the scent for carrion at the Old Bailey trial and the mass-rejoicing at Roger Cly's funeral are early indications of what he feels. The courtroom in Paris is also full of buzzing and stirring, but by this time the atmosphere has become positively cannibalistic; a jury of dogs has been empanelled to try the deer, Madame Defarge 'feasts' on the prisoner, Jacques III, with his very Carlylean croak, is described **as** an epicure.

Whatever Dickens's motives, a good deal of this is no doubt perfectly valid; morbid fantasies can still prompt shrewd observations, **as** when we are shown Darnay, the prisoner of half an hour, already learning to count the steps **as** he is led away to his cell. In particular, Dickens recognizes the ways in which a period of upheaval can obliterate the individual personality; there is no more telling detail in the book than the roll-call of the condemned containing the names of a prisoner who has died in jail and **two** who have already been guillotined, all of them forgotten. Insane

suspicion, senseless massacres, the rise to power of the worst elements: in the era of Gladstonian budgets Dickens understands the workings of a police state.

But it would be ludicrous to claim very much for the accuracy of Dickens's account of the French Revolution **as** such. There are scarcely any references to the actual course of events, and no suggestion at all that the revolution had an intellectual or idealistic content, while the portrayal of fanaticism seems childish if we compare it even with something **as** one-sided **as** [Jacques Anatole Francois Thibault's] *The Gods are Athirst*. For the purposes of the novel, the revolution is the Defarges, and although Carton foresees that Defarge in his turn will perish on the guillotine, he has no inkling of how the whole internecine process will ever come to a halt. **As** for Madame Defarge, she is **as** much driven by fate **as** the stony-hearted Marquis, with his coachmen cracking their whips like the Furies: the time has laid 'a dreadfully disfiguring hand upon her'. Her last entry is her most dramatic. Miss Pross is bathing her eyes to rid herself of feverish apprehensions, when she suddenly appears—materializes, one might say—in the doorway:

The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stern ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that water.

We are reminded, by rather too forcible a contrast, of the broken cask of red wine which prefaces Madame Defarge's first appearance in the novel. Her element, from the very start, is blood.

Still, *A Tale of Two Cities* is not a private nightmare, but a work which continues to give pleasure. Dickens's drives and conflicts are his raw material, not the source of his artistic power, and in itself the fact that the novel twists the French Revolution into a highly personal fantasy proves nothing: so, after all, does *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Everything depends on the quality of the writing—which is usually one's cue, in talking about Dickens, to pay tribute to his exuberance and fertility. Dickens's genius inheres in minute particulars; later we may discern patterns of symbolism and imagery, a design which lies deeper than the plot, but first we are struck by the lavish heaping-up of acute observations, startling similes, descriptive flourishes, circumstantial embroidery. Or such is the case with every Dickens novel except for the *Tale*, which is written in a style so grey and unadorned that many readers are reluctant to grant it a place in the canon at all. Dickens wouldn't be Dickens if there weren't occasional touches like the 'hospital procession of negro cupids, several headless and all cripples', which Mr. Lorry notices framing the mirror in his hotel (or the whitewashed cupid 'in the coolest linen' on the ceiling of his Paris office, which makes its appearance three hundred pages later). But for the most part one goes to the book for qualities which are easier to praise than to illustrate or examine: a rapid tempo which never lets up from the opening sentence, and a sombre eloquence which saves Carton from mere melodrama, and stamps an episode like the running-down of the child by the Marquis's carriage on one's mind with a primitive intensity rarely found after Dickens's early novels, like an outrage committed in a fairy-tale.

But it must be admitted that the *Tale* is in many ways a thin and uncharacteristic work, bringing the mounting despair of the eighteen-fifties to a dead end rather than ushering in the triumphs of the 'sixties. In no other novel, not even *Hard Times*, has Dickens's natural profusion been so drastically pruned. Above all, the book is notoriously deficient in humour. One falls—or flops—back hopefully on the Crunchers, but to small avail. True, the comic element parodies the serious action: Jerry, like his master, is a 'Resurrection-Man', but on the only occasion that we see him rifling a grave it turns out to be empty, while his son's panic-stricken flight with an imaginary coffin in full pursuit is nightmarish rather than funny. **As** comic characters the Crunchers are forced and mechanical; such true humour **as** there is in the book is rather to be found in scattered observations, but settings and characters are colourful rather than grotesque. Obviously Dickens's humour is many things, but it is usually bound up with a sense of almost magical power over nature: to distort, exaggerate, yoke together or dissolve is to manipulate and control external reality. In Dickens people are always taking on the qualities of objects with which they come into contact, and *vice versa*: a basic Dickensian trick of style, which makes its appearance **as** early **as** the opening pages of *Sketches by Boz*, where there is a fine passage on the 'resemblance and sympathy' between a man's face and the knocker on his front door. Such transformations are not unknown in *A Tale of Two Cities*—there is the obstinate door at Tellson's with the weak rattle in its throat, for example—but they occur less frequently than in any other Dickens novel, and there is a corresponding lack of power for which a neatly constructed plot is small compensation.

Contrary to what might be expected, this absence of burlesque is accompanied by a failure to present society in any depth. *A Tale of Two Cities* may deal with great political events, but nowhere else in the later work of Dickens is there less sense of society **as** a living organism. Evrémondes and Defarges alike seem animated by sheer hatred; we

hear very little of the stock social themes, money, hypocrisy, and snobbery. Tellson's, musty and cramped and antiquated, makes an excellent Dickensian set-piece, but it is scarcely followed up. Jarvis Lorry, too, is a sympathetic version of the fairygodfather, a saddened Cheeryble who repines at spending his days 'turning a vast pecuniary mangle', but this side of his character is only lightly sketched in. He may glance through the iron bars of his office-window 'as if they were ruled for figures too, and everything under the clouds were a sum', but he is more important as a protective, reassuring figure: in times of revolution Tellson's mustiness becomes a positive virtue.

Yet despite the dark mood in which it was conceived, the *Tale* isn't a wholly gloomy work; nor is the final impression which it leaves with us one of a wallow of self-pity on the scaffold. We are told of Darnay in the condemned cell (or is it Carton?) that his hold on life was strong, and it was very, very hard to loosen; by gradual efforts and degrees unclosed a little here, it clenched the tighter there; and when he brought his strength to bear on that hand and it yielded, this was closed again. There was a hurry, too, in all his thoughts, a turbulent and heated working of his heart, that contended against resignation.

And near the end, as Miss Pross grapples with Madame Defarge, Dickens speaks of 'the vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate'. The gruesome events of the book scarcely bear out such a judgment, yet as an article of faith, if not as a statement of the literal truth, it is curiously impressive. For all the sense of horror which he must have felt stirring within him when he wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens remained a moralist and a preacher, and it was his saving strength. But if the author doesn't succumb with Carton, neither does he escape with Darnay. At the end of the book 'we' gallop away not to safety and Lucie, but to the false hopes of Pip, the thwarted passion of Bradley Headstone, the divided life of John Jasper. Nothing is concluded, and by turning his malaise into a work of art Dickens obtains parole, not release: the prison will soon be summoning him once more.

#### Source Citation:

Gross, John. "A Tale of Two Cities." *EXPLORING Novels*. Online ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Student Resource Center - Gold*. Gale. Olentangy Liberty High School - OH. 13 May. 2008 <<http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&contentSet=GSRC&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=SRC-1&docId=>

"The Revolutionary Fate: A Tale of Two Cities." *EXPLORING Novels*. Online Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Student Resource Center - Gold*. Gale. Olentangy Liberty High School - OH. 13 May. 2008  
<<http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&contentset=GSRC&type=retrieve&tabid=T001&prodid=SRC-1&docid=EJ2111200531&source=gale&usergroupname=powe62775&version=1.0>>.

### **Table of Contents:**[Essay](#)

"The Revolutionary Fate: *A Tale of Two Cities*," in his *Craft and Character: Texts, Method, and Vocation in Modern Fiction*, Viking, 1957, pp. 49-69.

[In the following excerpt, Zabel explores the pivotal role Carton plays in *A Tale of Two Cities* and how Dickens revealed himself through the self-sacrificing actions of this character. ]

[Dickens] began the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities* at the most intense point of his emotional life. Its historical theme joined with a personal crisis that was bound, given Dickens' nature as an artist, to express itself in his fable. What resulted is a plot that has, superficially viewed, a traditional fairy-tale quality. It is a plot of old wrongs (Dr. Manette's eighteen-year imprisonment in the Bastille by the wicked St. Evrémondes) visited upon two romantic lovers (Lucie Manette and Charles Darnay, virtuous son of the evil St. Evrémonde) who, caught and divided in a great political cataclysm that wreaks the vengeance of the wronged upon their aristocratic oppressors, are almost made victims of that upheaval's rough justice (Dr. Manette's prison letter denouncing the St. Evrémondes and all their heirs), but are saved for a happy life and mankind's fairest hopes by the sacrifice and death of another man (Sydney Carton), Darnay's physical counterpart, who has allowed great gifts to sink into disappointment, self-disgust, and drunken habits, who loves Lucie hopelessly, and who finds salvation in giving his life that the girl may be happy and a new world may be inherited by her children. That is the fable, roughly summarized. It is a fable because it reduces life to a scheme of ideal ends and values.

It is exactly the kind of fable which, originating in the folklore and parables Dickens inherited from the past, had often furnished him with the mythic or allegorical essentials of his earlier novels, and whose basic simplicity gave him all the room he needed for substantiating the myth with his humor and fantasy, the realities of his social and human insight. Here French history gave him his social substance: ancient evil defied by its victims; a sinister prison stormed by the people (prisons that shut up and debase the souls of men figure everywhere in Dickens—*Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Edwin Drood*—all of them shadows of that Marshalsea that hung over his childhood); this fury in turn changing the populace into a wild mob, a world gone mad in its effort to avenge the villainies at its root.

Though the *Tale* adds few characters to the gallery of Dickens' greatest creations, it creates one who is memorable—Carton himself. Jarvis Lorry of Tellson's Bank has his charm. Jerry Cruncher and his "flopping" wife have their grotesque appeal: they belong among the lowly folk in Dickens who show the debasing influence of poverty and the criminal cunning it breeds. Miss Pross embodies the English courage Dickens could find in the absurdities of his race. Dr. Manette's hauntings by the prison-house repeat the amnesic terrors that Dickens had already shown in *Little Dorrit*, where old Dorrit, in his new-found wealth, is haunted by the Marshalsea prison that held him captive for years and will never let him escape its thralldom. The two lovers, Lucie and Charles, are romantically touching but beyond that conventional figures. Mme. Defarge and her fellow-knitters at the foot of the guillotine have become a classic part of the Revolutionary legend. It is Carton who gives the novel its serious life, its real center of interest.

He is Dickens' real achievement in portraiture in this book. He too has his kin in the other novels—men of high gifts or good character into whose souls some canker of disillusionment or disappointed egotism has eaten and who find themselves fatally, or almost fatally, overtaken by their own evil geniuses. They can certainly be taken as, in some sense, versions of his own alter ego—that passionate, demonic, secret self that bred his genius but also warred on his happiness and haunted his life. Sometimes, by good fortune or a helping hand, they are rescued from their "dark angels" and restored to life, like Clennam and Pip. Usually they drive themselves to self-destruction and tragedy. Sydney Carton, so charming but so feckless, human but cynical, gifted but self-condemned, knows that he too must finally be destroyed, but the sound humanity at the root of his nature directs that his end will be expiatory, that new life will be born of it; that he will do "a far, far better thing" in dying than he has ever done before. Here Dickens made a hero of his other self and created one of the most convincing and psychologically valid heroes in any of his books.

An English critic, Jack Lindsay, giving this novel one of the few close examinations it has received [in his essay "A Tale of Two Cities," published in *Life and Letters*, September, 1949, pp. 191-204], sees *A Tale of Two Cities* as a direct reflection of "the lacerated and divided state of Dickens's emotions" at this moment of his life. His interpretation must of its nature remain conjectural but it joins with the evidence of Dickens' other late novels in offering a suggestion which no serious reader can dismiss out of hand. The two heroes of the *Tale*, "practically twins in appearance and who love the same girl," reflect the latent conflict in Dickens himself. Carton "by his devoted death reaches the same level of heroic generosity as his rival: indeed goes higher. His gesture of renunciation completes the ravages of the Revolution with its ruthless justice, and transforms them into acts of purification and redemption, without which the life of renewed love would not be possible." And it is more than the French Revolution that is put before us. It is, as everywhere in Dickens, the whole condition of conventional morality, of bourgeois venality and hypocrisy, which he saw possessing the Nineteenth Century soul "immured in a maddening cell of lies and cruelties, and seeking to break through into the truth, into a full and happy relationship" with humanity. "It was the demented sense of environing pressures," Lindsay ventures, "of an unjust and inescapable mechanism, which caught Dickens up in the midst of his wild mummery and gave him a sense of release when he determined to write the novel." Such

relevances in a novel are never provable, but no one who reads *A Tale of Two Cities* in the context of Dickens' later work can fail to see in it these references to his later life and ordeal.

Potentially at least the *Tale* is the most powerful example of that now largely neglected or discredited genre, the historical novel, which Victorian England can show. Its theme has a greater historical import and modernity than anything in Scott. Its drama has a stronger modern relevance than Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* or George Eliot's *Romola*. Its social fable legitimately calls for comparison with *Les Misérables* and even with *War and Peace*. It does not of course sustain a full comparison with these mightier dramas. Dickens' personal fantasy pressed too hard as he wrote it. He sentimentalized the drama of the lovers, from whose part in the story his acute psychological penetration almost wholly drops out, just as he permitted too urgent an argument to take over the political theme: this, though treated with considerable complexity and thus rescued from melodramatic crudity, tends to become artificial where it should be realistic, and idealistic where it calls for the substance of convincing social and political conflict. But for all that, the plot makes a profoundly moving story. Where it falters in realism, Dickens' radical symbolic sense comes to its aid. The Revolution and its cognate theme of Resurrection sustain the novel. With Lindsay's last word on the book at least, any intelligent opinion of the *Tale* must agree: that it may not be "a great work, though like anything written by Dickens it has great elements," but when it is seriously approached, it turns out to be "a work of high interest, yielding some essential clues to the workings of Dickens's mind and of creative symbolism in general."

What were the source and tendency of those workings? Every critic who has ever written on Dickens has felt obliged to formulate a theory about them. To earlier clues based on his social and moral sympathies there have now been added clues derived from what we have come to know of his emotional experience and of the bent this gave to his plots and symbols. The idea that Dickens was a sublime and irresponsible compiler of popular fantasies has been as thoroughly dismissed as the notion that he worked in terms of consistent socialist and political theses. Neither of these approaches to his genius is workable. A different consistency, a more radical and vital impulse, worked in his nature, and it was this that rescued him from the claims of his popularity, the distracting influence of his public success, and the facility of moral compromise.

He was obviously a man divided against himself and a representative Victorian in being so. The conflicts we trace in his social and moral arguments show it no less than the self-divided or self-indicting heroes he created in almost every one of his later novels. But when Shaw spoke of Dickens as a man who, "in spite of his exuberance," was "deeply reserved," and whose "outward life" was "a feat of acting from beginning to end," he did something more than point to his psychological contradictions or moral duplicity—did so, we may assume, intentionally, for he clearly aimed to define in Dickens the central integrity of purpose and imagination he ascribed by definition to any man of true genius. Behind the conflicts of Dickens' behavior, behind the ambiguity of his moral judgments, there existed an instinct for personal integration, for the wholeness and self-realization which are the animus of any vital character and an imperative

claim in the character which seeks to fulfill itself creatively through imagination and art. The nature that such a man keeps in "deep reserve" is the one he hopes to realize in himself. His outward "acting" is likely to be his one means of protecting it from superficial or mistaken recognition. He knows that only his art will contain and express it justly. And while Dickens' public histrionics, imperious claims, and efforts at self-justification were too open to give him a place among the secret-keepers or self-concealers of genius; while he certainly spoke for himself in more than his art (his voluminous letters, public speeches and petitions, incessant editorializings, notably his published defiance of Victorian convention when he defended himself at the time of his separation from his wife, make as open a book of his private life as we find in any major writer of modern times), there still worked in his make-up a deeply secretive impulse. It was secretive, no doubt, because it remained to the last rooted in unconscious instinct. Graham Greene, in his essay on *Oliver Twist*, has recalled how Chesterton once emphasized a major fact about Dickens' novels: how they convey the sense of a mystery far more important than the ostensible mystery of their plots—a sense that "even the author was unaware of what was really going on." "The secrecy is sensational; the secret is tame." The outrageous, absurd, frightening, unforgettable characters are always "keeping something back from the author as well as from the reader. When the book closes we do not know their real secret. They soothe the optimistic Dickens with something less terrible than the truth."

The surface optimism of Dickens was, we may be sure, a subterfuge of his public life, his overt confidence. The very fact that it expressed itself so resolutely in his dénouements and valedictions—even in the flawed last sentence of *Great Expectations*, recommended by Bulwer-Lytton, where for once Dickens originally intended to suppress it—makes certain how much it was a function of his conscious morality, his self-constituted office as an arbiter of conventional justice. The truth it disguises is something deeper, more elusive, more "terrible." If his novels persist in power and fascination; if they have survived their Victorian artifices and contrivance; if in spite of their superficial sentiments they keep company—as they unquestionably do—with the work of greater artists and intelligences in fiction than Dickens definably was, it is because such truth is rooted in them and gives them their informing passion. What was it?

It was a truth not optimistic but tragic. Its deepest instinct was critical, doubtful, exacerbated, rather than confident. It always speaks more convincingly of perversity and evil than of goodness. It works more subtly in acts of recognition, surrender, despair, and expiation than in the easy triumphs and rewards of virtue. As the plots of Dickens deepen in their obsession with guilt and evil (so much so as to lead Greene to define a Manichean bent in Dickens' morality); as his characters struggle with a fate that is more powerful than their conscious powers of mastering or understanding it, so his fantasies take on a complexity that becomes more than social or moral. It refers to a willful fatality in the conditions of life, an enmity in nature or matter which can be met only by submission or recognition—if not, in characters too violent for such compromise, by acts of nihilism and self-destruction. The egotism of the resisting personality must either surrender or perish. Clennam and Pip surrender. They accept their humility. But Headstone and Jasper will destroy themselves because their natures have defied the laws of their fate. Headstone

does so blindly and desperately, but in Jasper's case it is he himself who becomes his own accuser and condemner.

Carton surrenders and dies but he also saves—saves himself morally but also saves and redeems humanity in doing so. He "chooses" his death, but he is given the opportunity of making it a sacrifice, and to him is granted a faith in regeneration which the self-destroyer is otherwise denied. For the first time in his novels Dickens resorts to the explicit language of the religious hope: "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Dickens, whose religion was wholly personal, conventional, and undogmatic when he talked about it, resorted for once to the phrases of supernatural faith and used them for prophetic purposes. As revolution in politics promises the rebirth of society, so resurrection in its Christian reference implies a spiritual rebirth gained through sacrifice: not an old life remade or rebegun, but an old life lost or destroyed in order that a new one may supervene.

The principle of revolution which Dickens feared in its political and social consequences, and on whose French manifestation he leveled a characteristic English rebuke, had deeper roots in his make-up than his moral sentiment could openly admit. It was rooted in the recalcitrant egotism of his personal morality. If, as V. S. Pritchett has recently said [in *The New Statesman and Nation*, May 26, 1956], the "emphasis on the self" in modern literature derives from the "intense feeling of being part of history in the making," the Dickensian egotism reveals itself as revolutionary in the radical sense. It sees the root of human evil and injustice as more than social or political. It sees it as humanly constitutional, and resists it by means of a personal defiance which usually ends in sacrifice. The self becomes at once a challenge and an agent of expiation. "Although Communist writers regard the enhancement of egotism as a sign of social disintegration, it is really revolutionary, and is the necessary civilizing force in mass society."

The moral compromise in Dickens' later novels, their suspicion of political logic and the idea of historical necessity, was partly his tribute to the English tradition of empirical faith, partly his acquiescence in the doctrine of prudence in matters of social and moral success. Against it there works the force of his personal resistance, defiant and rebellious, a mode of personal integrity but also a sacrificial means of redeeming the deceived human condition. The non-conformism of Dickens' character finally shows itself to be both destructive and expiatory. He reserved for himself the fate of the dissident and the redeemer, and by expressing it in Carton's death and redemption, he spoke for the revolutionary fate by which the rebel against convention and compromise justifies his office in society.

If the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* brings havoc with its justice, the heroism of Carton suggests a nobler, a more humane, hope. It is the hope of the regenerative capacity in the moral personality of humanity. Dickens, behind his outward sentiments and conventionality, shared it with his greater Nineteenth Century contemporaries—with Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. If his involvement in the Victorian situation kept him from expressing it with their logic in argument or self-exposure, his share in it still gave him the representative force of becoming

the most eloquent voice of personal dissent and revolutionary challenge the English novel of his age can show.

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