

A Tale of Two Cities: Historical Context

A Tale of Two Cities was published serially in 1859. As a historical novel about the French Revolution, however, it takes us back to 18th century London and Paris.

1757-1794: The Period Represented in the Novel

Though *A Tale of Two Cities* begins in 1770 with Doctor Manette's release from the Bastille and ends in late 1793 or early 1794, the story as a whole covers a much broader period. In the larger view, the novel begins in 1757 (the year of Doctor Manette's incarceration under the *ancien régime*) and its final scene anticipates a post-revolutionary Paris. However, as a historical novel organized around the events of the French Revolution (1789-1794), the major historical features of *A Tale of Two Cities* are drawn from the major events of the revolutionary period in France – the fall of the Bastille (July 14, 1789), the September Massacres (September 2-6, 1792), and the Reign of Terror (1793-1794).

From a historical point of view, *A Tale of Two Cities* gives a rather compressed account of the French Revolution; yet this is appropriate in a novel concerned as much with the lives of private individuals as with public events. Dickens researched the revolutionary period carefully in preparation for writing *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the novel maintains a high level of historical accuracy. Complete historical explanations will be found in the notes that accompany each issue of this re-serialization.

1859: The Period of the Novel's Publication

In 1859, when *A Tale of Two Cities* was first serialized, England was experiencing a period of social and political stability. It had long enjoyed a stable monarchy, and it had become – partly through its leading role in the Industrial Revolution and through colonial expansion – a prosperous nation and a major European power. France was comparatively tumultuous. After the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte had become emperor (in 1804) and started on his campaign to take over Europe. In 1814, the French monarchy was restored by the forces allied against Napoleon (including England) and the Emperor was sent into exile; he returned, however, and regained power for a brief period before his final defeat in 1815. France then had a king again, but

monarchical rule was challenged by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the latter establishing the Second Republic. Louis Napoleon, a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, became president of the Second Republic in 1848; in 1852, however, he declared himself emperor. The Second Republic then became the Second Empire.

Though relations were essentially peaceful between England and the Second Empire, the British tended to perceive a second Emperor Napoleon as a possible threat, and the French were not endeared to the English by events of 1858: An assassination attempt on Louis Napoleon and his Empress disclosed a plot organized by a group of French people living in England. This plot, perpetrated with grenades of Birmingham manufacture, increased French-English tensions in the year before *A Tale of Two Cities* was published; however, it did not have serious consequences for international relations.

Our own country was on the verge of a major historical event in 1859. Having gained its independence in the period represented in *A Tale of Two Cities*, America was about to embark, just after the novel's publication, upon the Civil War (1860-65).

Introducing the Novel

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair . . .

— from *A Tale of Two Cities*

With these famous words, Dickens begins *A Tale of Two Cities*. In 1859, the year in which *A Tale of Two Cities* was published, Dickens was probably the most popular author of his time.

Dickens had grown increasingly dismayed at the social and economic inequality of British society—the terrible living conditions of the urban poor, an arrogant and uncaring ruling class, and the ravages of the Industrial Revolution. The novels he wrote just before *A Tale of Two Cities*—*Bleak House* (1852–53), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorritt* (1855–57)—reflect his darker view of society. While it was the best of times for England's wealthy, with their town homes and country estates, Dickens believed that times had never been worse for the nation's poor. Hunger, disease, poverty, and ignorance characterized the daily fabric of their lives. Dickens had little hope that a social upheaval, like the one that shook France just half a century earlier, could be avoided.

Even though Dickens's mind was troubled during this period of his life, all was not gloomy. He had met and fallen in love with a young actress named Ellen Ternan. She was a petite blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman whom scholars feel is the model for Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. New beginnings—like the ones in Dickens's life—became an important theme in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The title of the first book of *A Tale of Two Cities*, "Recalled to Life," probably had special meaning for Dickens in the late 1850s.

The novel tells the story of people whose lives are interrupted or wasted, then reawakened with a new purpose. It shows how the mistakes of the past and the evil they cause can be turned into triumphs through suffering and virtuous actions.

Stylistically, *A Tale of Two Cities* was something new for Dickens. Unlike most of his novels, the book is not set in the England of

Dickens's own time, and it is his only book that takes place mostly in a foreign country. More importantly, the book lacks the huge comic gallery of whimsical and eccentric characters that made Dickens famous. There is no Scrooge, no Fagin, and no Mr. Pickwick. There is very little of the humor that made Dickens's readers laugh, and few of the touching sentimental episodes that made them weep.

Instead, Dickens chose to make the plot the centerpiece of this novel. He called it "the best story I have written." Critics have praised the way all the events relate to the progress of destiny. Several of the characters are symbolic representations of ideas rather than real-life individuals. One such character does not even have a name. The novel is rich in its detailed descriptions, its panoramic sweep of history, and its suspense, mystery, and terror. It is not surprising that *A Tale of Two Cities* has been filmed so many times.

Dickens hoped to make the wider historical events of the French Revolution understandable by portraying the personal struggles of one group of people. In the preface to the novel, however, he also gives readers a clue about the meaning the book had in his personal life:

Throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me; I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself.

It is not hard to read into these lines Dickens's own feeling of being trapped by overwhelming duties and responsibilities. But the lines may also express the liberating emotion Dickens felt at being, like Dr. Manette of the novel, "recalled to life."

THE TIME AND PLACE

The action of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place over a period of about eighteen years, beginning in 1775 and ending in 1793. Some of the story takes place earlier, as told in the flashback. A **flashback** reveals something that happened before that point in the story or before the story began. It provides information to help explain key events in the story.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the key events take place just before and during the French Revolution. The novel is set mostly in London and Paris, with some chapters set in rural France

and the English port city of Dover. The novel—Dickens's twelfth—was published in the author's new magazine, *All the Year Round*, from April to November 1859, and in book form the same year.

Did You Know?

The French Revolution was one of the most important events of the 1700s, and its influence was still strong in Charles Dickens's time. The revolution began in 1789 with the attack on the notorious prison, the Bastille—a key event in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Throughout the revolution's different phases, various elected bodies ruled France, but none enjoyed total support of the people. Several forces resorted to terrorism to defeat their political opponents.

In addition to national turmoils, France was struggling with other countries in Europe. France's revolutionary government frightened Europe's monarchs, who feared that the spread of democratic ideas would bring an end to their power. The European monarchs sent troops to end the threat to their thrones.

Wars raged for six years. The French government had many problems to deal with, including opposition from some French citizens. In 1799

certain political leaders plotted to overthrow the current government. They chose the French general Napoleon Bonaparte to help them. Bonaparte quickly took power and crowned himself emperor a few years later.

Though historians may disagree on some points, they generally cite five reasons why the revolution occurred: France could not produce enough food to feed its people; the newly wealthy middle-class was without political power; peasants hated the ancient feudal system, in which they were forced to work for local nobles; new ideas about social and political reforms were spreading; and the French

Before You Read

A Tale of Two Cities

Book the First

~~FOCUS ACTIVITY~~

What would it be like to spend a long time away from your friends, family, and home? How would you cope with returning to your old life?

Journal Writing

Write in your journal about the most difficult challenges you'd face. Discuss how you would deal with them, as well as how other people could help you cope with your return to your old life.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how one man responded to the end of a long nightmare of captivity.

BACKGROUND

See original copy attached

Did You Know?

A Tale of Two Cities, like all of Dickens's novels, was published serially, or in weekly or monthly installments in popular magazines. The installments usually included one or two chapters and an illustration of an important or dramatic scene. The novels were then published in book form after the serial was finished. Although some novels had been published serially before Dickens's time, his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), set the standard for serial publishing in nineteenth-century Britain. Dickens chose *A Tale of Two Cities* as the first serial to be published in his own new magazine, *All the Year Round*.

The serial form allowed Dickens to introduce a large number of characters and develop the reader's familiarity with them. It also allowed the author to respond to the likes and dislikes of the audience as he was writing the novel. Finally, serial publication required Dickens to end each installment with a "cliffhanger." He hoped this technique would leave the audience in suspense, hungry for more of the story and willing to buy the next issue. For example, Chapter 5 ends with a glimpse at a mysterious, unknown man in a darkened attic room. Anxious readers had to wait a week to find out who he was. This technique proved successful for Dickens in this novel as well as his others. *A Tale of Two Cities* sold thousands of copies of his magazine each week. As you read, pay attention to how Dickens ends each chapter.

Background for *A Tale of Two Cities*

For the historical background of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens relied on a massive history of the French Revolution written by his friend Thomas Carlyle. Many incidents in the novel are based on real-life occurrences described by Carlyle. Dickens was also influenced by Carlyle's belief that the revolution was inspired by the centuries of cruelty and poverty the French poor had to endure at the hands of the corrupt nobility.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

countenance [koun'tə nəns] n. face; appearance

doleful [dōl'fəl] adj. sad; gloomy

flounder [floun'dər] v. to struggle to move

prevalent [prev'ə lənt] adj. common

sagacity [sə gəs'ə tē] n. wisdom

sublime [səb līm'] adj. elevated

tedious [tē'dē əs] adj. boring; dull

tremulous [trəm'yə ləs] adj. trembling

for enrichment / not standard vocab

ORIGINAL

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."—SHAKESPEARE.

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

No. 2.]

SATURDAY, MAY 7, 1859.

[PRICE 2d.]

A TALE OF TWO CITIES.

In Three Books.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

BOOK THE FIRST. RECALLED TO LIFE.

CHAPTER IV. THE PREPARATION.

WHEN the mail got successfully to Dover, in the course of the forenoon, the head-drawer at the Royal George Hotel opened the coach-door, as his custom was. He did it with some flourish of ceremony, for a mail journey from London in winter was an achievement to congratulate an adventurous traveller upon.

By that time, there was only one adventurous traveller left to be congratulated; for, the two others had been set down at their respective roadside destinations. The mildevery inside of the coach, with its damp and dirty straw, its disagreeable smell, and its obscurity, was rather like a larger sort of dog-kennel. Mr. Lorry, the passenger, shaking himself out of it, in chains of straw, a tangle of shaggy wrapper, flapping hat, and muddy legs, was rather like a larger sort of dog.

"There will be a packet to Calais to-morrow, drawer?"

"Yes, sir, if the weather holds and the wind sets tolerable fair. The tide will serve pretty nicely at about two in the afternoon, sir. Bed, sir?"

"I shall not go to bed till night; but I want a bedroom, and a barber."

"And then breakfast, sir? Yes, sir. That way, sir, if you please. Show Concord! Gentleman's valise and hot water to Concord. Pull off gentleman's boots in Concord. (You will find a fine sea-coal fire, sir.) Fetch barber to Concord. Stir about there, now, for Concord!"

The Concord bed-chamber being always assigned to a passenger by the mail, and passengers by the mail being always heavily wrapped up from head to foot, the room had the odd interest for the establishment of the Royal George, that although but one kind of man was seen to go into it, all kinds and varieties of men came out of it. Consequently, another drawer, and two porters, and several maids, and the landlady, were all loitering by accident at various points of the road between the Concord and the coffee-room, when a gentleman of sixty, formally dressed in a brown suit of clothes, pretty well worn, but very well kept, with large square

cuffs and large flaps to the pockets, passed along on his way to his breakfast.

The coffee-room had no other occupant, that forenoon, than the gentleman in brown. His breakfast-table was drawn before the fire, and as he sat, with its light shining on him, waiting for the meal, he sat so still, that he might have been sitting for his portrait.

Very orderly and methodical he looked, with a hand on each knee, and a loud watch ticking a sonorous sermon under his flapped waistcoat, as though it pitted its gravity and longevity against the levity and evanescence of the brisk fire. He had a good leg, and was a little vain of it, for his brown stockings fitted sleek and close, and were of a fine texture; his shoes and buckles, too, though plain, were trim. He wore an odd little sleek crisp flaxen wig, setting very close to his head: which wig, it is to be presumed, was made of hair, but which looked far more as though it were spun from filaments of silk or glass. His linen, though not of a fineness in accordance with his stockings, was as white as the tops of the waves that broke upon the neighbouring beach, or the specks of soil that glistened in the sunlight far at sea. A face, habitually suppressed and quieted, was still lighted up under the quaint wig by a pair of moist bright eyes that it must have cost their owner, in years gone by, some pains to drill to the composed and reserved expression of Tellson's Bank. He had a healthy colour in his cheeks, and his face, though lined, bore few traces of anxiety. But, perhaps the confidential bachelor clerks in Tellson's Bank were principally occupied with the cares of other people; and perhaps second-hand cares, like second-hand clothes, come easily off and on.

Completing his resemblance to a man who was sitting for his portrait, Mr. Lorry dropped off asleep. The arrival of his breakfast roused him, and he said to the drawer, as he moved his chair to it:

"I wish accommodation prepared for a young lady who may come here at any time to-day. She may ask for Mr. Jarvis Lorry, or she may only ask for a gentleman from Tellson's Bank. Please to let me know."

"Yes, sir. Tellson's Bank in London, sir."

"Yes."

"Yes, sir. We have oftentimes the honour to entertain your gentlemen in their travelling backwards and forwards betwixt London and