

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Tale of Two Cities (Unabridged) by Charles Dickens

Book Information

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (Unabridged)

Quiz Number: 719

TOR Books, 1989

ISBN 0-8125-0506-9; LCCN

367 Pages

Book Level: 9.7

Interest Level: UG

Life in 1859 Paris and London during the oppressive and turbulent years leading up to the French Revolution is revealed in this classic Dickens's story.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Poverty; Countries/Regions, England; Countries/Regions, France; People, Royalty; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club; Series, Puffin Classics; Wars, French Revolution; What Kids Are Reading, 2012, 100 Most Read Fiction, ATOS Book Levels 9.0-12.9

Main Characters

Charles Darnay a French aristocrat who abandons his inheritance to earn his daily bread as a tutor in London; marries Lucie

Doctor Manette unjustly imprisoned for eighteen years in France and "recalled to life" by the daughter he never knew

Jarvis Lorry a bachelor "man of business" who works for Tellson and Company

Lucie Manette the Doctor's virtuous and loving daughter

Madame Defarge an instrument of vengeance, who represents the cruelest aspects of the terror that grips Paris in the wake of the French Revolution

Monsieur le Marquis Darnay's uncle and the epitome of aristocratic corruption and oppression

Sydney Carton Darnay's spitting image physically, but a dissolute man with few convictions and no ambitions

Vocabulary

blunderbuss a firearm with a short barrel and a flaring muzzle

chateau French word for the mansion on a country estate

escutcheon a shield or plate, usually displaying a family's identifying symbols or colors

guillotine a machine for beheading by allowing a heavy blade to drop from a high distance across the victim's neck

postilion one who rides as a guide on a horse-drawn coach

Synopsis

The novel begins with Doctor Manette, unjustly imprisoned in Paris for eighteen years, being "recalled to life" by his banker, Jarvis Lorry, and the daughter, Lucie, whom he had never seen. The circumstances surrounding his imprisonment form a secret he keeps even as his kind and loyal daughter nurses Doctor Manette back to life in London to which they move. The Doctor and daughter are soon called, with Mr. Lorry, to testify at the treason trial of a man named Charles Darnay. All were coincidental voyagers on the same ship from France, but with the trial their fates are woven more tightly together. A dissolute sometimes lawyer, named Sydney Carton, happens to resemble Darnay. Their resemblance results in Darnay's acquittal and Carton's involvement with the Manettes.

Darnay, born a French aristocrat, has abandoned his homeland and inheritance because of his moral repulsion from the cruel treatment of peasants by the members of his class and family. He prefers to earn his own way in the world as a tutor, rather than accept the wealth and privileges to which he was born. He becomes increasingly familiar with the Manettes and, like Carton, falls in love with Lucie. Knowing himself to be unworthy of the love he feels, Carton does not pursue Lucie, but does reveal his heart and pledges to tender any service in his power

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she may need. Darnay weds Lucie, and a hint of her father's secret emerges. Darnay's uncle, the Marquis, was involved in a sordid affair that resulted in the death of a French peasant girl and her brother. Manette had been imprisoned because of his knowledge of the affair. The Doctor's one stipulation before Lucie's marriage is that Darnay must not reveal his family connection to the Marquis and the crimes of his family, for which Darnay is blameless.

During these same years, Madame and Monsieur Defarge, proprietors of a wine shop near Paris, have long been engaged in a secret movement against the French aristocracy. Their plotting and patience contributes to the arrival of the French Revolution. The underclass suddenly controls the country, and the bloody season of vengeance begins, personified by the "National Barber," the guillotine and its daily harvest. With the aristocracy being relentlessly slaughtered, Darnay decides to return to France for the sake of his imprisoned caretaker, threatened with death despite the fact that the peasants on Darnay's estate were voluntarily freed of oppressive taxes and rents when Darnay refused to assume his legal inheritance. Darnay is imprisoned as an aristocrat. Lucie, Doctor Manette, Lorry, and Carton are soon working to secure his release in Paris. As an ex-prisoner, Doctor Manette merits hero status among the Republican Tribunal and mobs. But the vengeful and pitiless Madame Defarge has an even deeper and more sinister status among the Patriots and in the plot. As it was her brother and sister who were the innocent victims of Darnay's family, she conspires to exterminate all who carry that family's name. The haste, gore, and madness of the Paris terror give her the perfect means. Darnay is sentenced to death. Only Sydney Carton's counter-conspiring to take Darnay's place at the guillotine while his friends escape foils her revenge. The novel ends with the transformation of his character from a drunken nihilist to an ennobled martyr.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What does the reader learn from the conversation in which Sydney Carton reveals his feelings for and to Lucie Manette?

Carton establishes his unequivocal repudiation of his own character and his conviction that he cannot change it. At the same time, he makes his love for Lucie appear true and constant. By stepping aside from his desire, he proves its strength to both Lucie and the reader. "Sacrificing" her to the marriage with Darnay from a sincere belief that Charles will make her happy, Carton displays the noble character that will underlie his ultimate martyrdom.

Literary Analysis

Analyze the symbolism implied in Doctor Manette's shoemaking tools.

The shoemaking incidents occur both during his imprisonment and at times of unbearable stress in his life. At those points in time, Manette feels helpless. Shoemaking is a harmless preoccupation that allows Manette to retreat into a delusion where awareness of his helplessness cannot reach him. The style of shoes he makes are fashionable ladies' shoes, with his daughter in mind. Thus, even as he attempts to pathetically escape from his circumstances, he is pointed hopefully toward the future. This benign response to injustice is in contrast to Madame Defarge's knitting, which knots the relentless register of her desire for revenge.

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Inferential Comprehension

How did Darnay's morality differ from that of Madame Defarge?

While living in safety in London, Darnay exposes himself to personal risk because he cannot allow Gabelle, an innocent man, to perish. More directly a victim than Darnay had been, Madame Defarge is indifferent to justice. In her overwhelming desire for revenge, she is willing (in fact, determined) to see Darnay's innocent child killed in retribution.

Inferential Comprehension

Why were the Paris mobs so eager and willing to countenance the relentless work of the guillotine?

Their thirst for vengeance preceded the Revolution for centuries. It was deep and not easily slaked. They might also have legitimately reasoned that the aristocracy would try to re-establish their cruel regime if permitted the opportunity to do so. Dickens, however, posits an even deeper factor. By showing the "lawful" London mobs as likewise blood-mad at executions, he allows the possibility that humanity's cruelty is endemic, not simply circumstantial.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors *A Tale of Two Cities* can be an ideal introduction to the historical time and events of the French Revolution. Once students have responded emotionally to the events of the novel, you can lead them to a more particular examination of the historical record. How accurate is Dickens's delineation of the root causes and the violence of the great terror? Depending on how much depth you wish to pursue, this tale of two cities can lead to an analysis of two revolutions. How and why did the American and the French Revolutions differ?

Understanding the Author's Craft Like Sidney Carton's "card game" with the spy, Barsad, the novel plays out its plot very strategically. Secrets are held until their revelations will have the boldest dramatic effect. Metaphors of echoes,

and footsteps keep readers alert to later scenes and consequences that sweep the novel's characters into the hands of history. As a discussion or essay topic, ask students to outline and analyze how Dickens paces his plot and plays out its secrets like cards. Does he play his hand expertly, or do students feel hoodwinked by aces he hides up his sleeve?

Extending Meaning In this novel, the forces of history and the psychology of personality emerge as ambiguously related sources for explaining characters' choices and lives. Carton loses his parents at a young age and leads a wasted life. Darnay's mother imparts a sense of decency to her son that subverts the training and habits of his entire class background. Yet the spectacle of cruelties we witness in the Revolution's aftermath are explained in terms of political forces and natural law. Ask students to explore these dual sources of explanation for human behavior. Does Dickens seem more inclined to trust one form of explanation more than the other? Are his implicit theories of individual psychology and political behavior sound or flawed in some fundamental way? To put the issue another way, would Dickens have made a better therapist or politician?

Responding to Literature Sydney Carton's death is a sinner's martyrdom. The reader is primed to accept his sacrifice by the fact he views himself as a man of no account or use seizing his lone chance to perform a noble act. How might readers' responses have been altered if Carton had been more like Darnay from the beginning? If Carton had been a thoroughly virtuous man, would he have been more or less compelled to sacrifice himself for Darnay? Perhaps the fundamental form of the question would be: is the dissolute nature of Carton's character morally necessary to explain his choice, or is it merely an aesthetic convenience that makes the martyrdom more palatable to Dickens's readers?