

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.

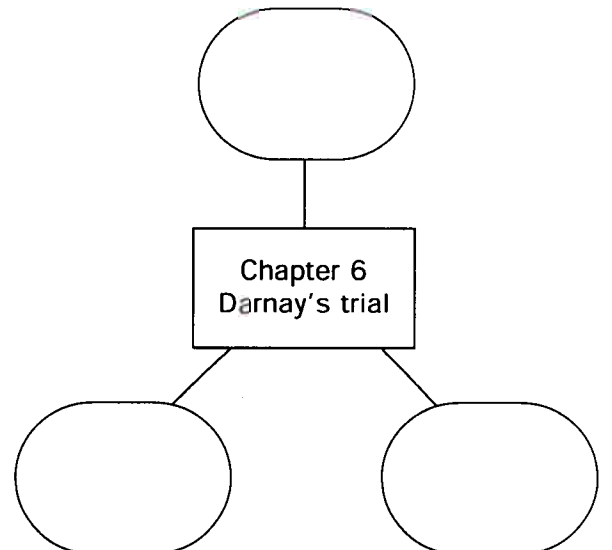
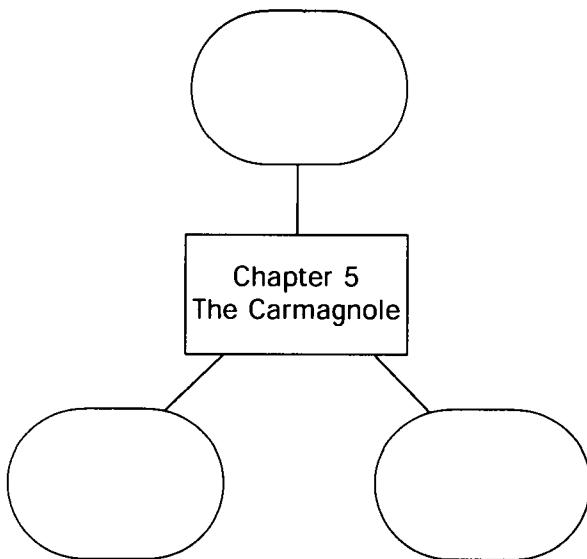
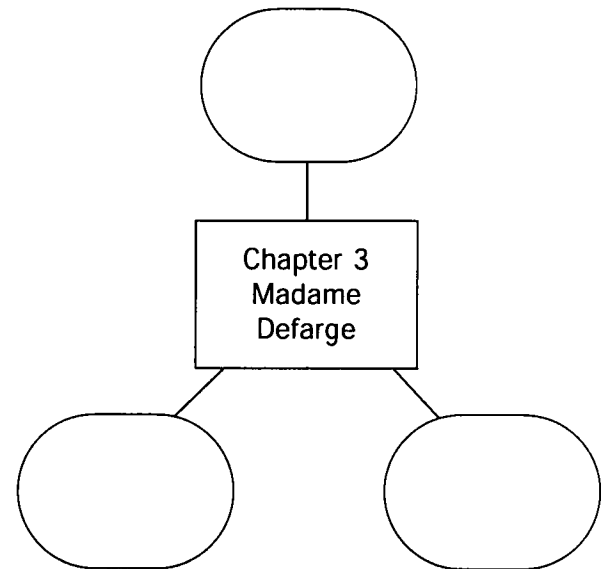
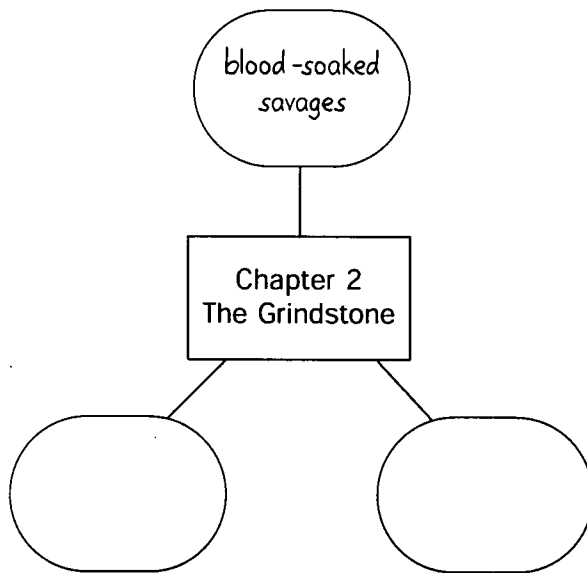
Though historians may disagree on some points, they generally cite five reasons why the revolution occurred: France could not produce enough food to feed its people; the newly wealthy middle-class was without political power; peasants hated the ancient feudal system, in which they were forced to work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

Active Reading

A Tale of Two Cities
Book the Third, Chapters 1-6

Appealing Passages

At the time he was writing *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens was just beginning his successful career as a public reader of his works. Many critics believe that his need for dramatic, exciting, or emotional scenes to turn into readings influenced his writing of *A Tale of Two Cities*. This section includes several such scenes, ones that Dickens may have believed would appeal to his listeners during his numerous reading tours. Use the chart on this page to describe aspects of the listed scenes that would make them especially powerful and appealing to listeners.



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Active Reading

A Tale of Two Cities
Book the Second, Chapters 1-13

cause
+
effect

In these chapters of *A Tale of Two Cities*, events occur that have been caused by prior events and that will profoundly influence events that happen later in the story. Use the chart on this page to keep track of the causes of the events listed.


| Event | | Cause |
|--|---------|--------------------------------------|
| Darnay is on trial | because | two spies gave evidence against him. |
| Darnay is found innocent | because | |
| Dr. Manette turns pale in the garden | because | |
| The Marquis's trip to the country is interrupted | because | |
| The mender of roads stares at the Marquis's carriage | because | |
| Two places are set for dinner at the Marquis's chateau | because | |
| Another "stone face" is added to the chateau | because | |
| Lorry must dissuade Stryver from proposing to Lucie | because | |
| Darnay does not tell Dr. Manette his real name | because | |
| Carton admires and loves Lucie | because | |

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The French Revolution

A Tale of Two Cities
By
Charles Dickens



2

Charles Dickens (1812-1869)



- Difficult childhood—reflected in his writing
- 1827—Fifteen years old—law clerk
- 1836-1837—*Pickwick Papers*—Dickens became overnight success
- Serial publication of his novels
- Novels attack social problems


3

A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

- Serialized installments in periodical
- Published 60 years after French Revolution
- Used as a source—Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*
- Uses French Revolution to comment on hunger and social injustice happening in England at his time.

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Interesting Facts about A Tale of Two Cities



- Not set in England during Dickens's time
- Only book that takes place mostly in a foreign country
- Dickens called it "the best story I have written"
- Novel sold 1000s of copies of Dickens's magazines each week.

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Task:

1. Read over "The Causes of the French Revolution 1 and 2"
2. Complete the tasks. Be sure to answer in complete detailed sentences.

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Theme

- The main idea or underlying meaning of a literary work
- Four ways the author expresses theme
 1. Feelings of main character
 2. Thoughts and conversations
 3. What does the main character learn over the course of the story
 4. Actions or events

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Themes of the Novel

- The forces of history often shape people's lives and determine their destinies.
- Violence breeds violence.
- Love has the power to heal, comfort, and redeem.
- Cruelty, injustice and oppression often incite people to rebel against governments.
- Heroism can be expressed through self-sacrifice.
- Violence and terror are too often used to achieve the goals of revolutions.

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Group Work 1

- Discuss the content of Book 1—Who are the characters? What are the significant events? Why?
- Complete the Table. Be sure to include detailed responses on characters, main events, and setting.
- Answer response questions in detailed sentences. Be sure to use specific examples from the text.

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Parallelism

- The repeated use of words, phrases, or sentences that have similar grammatical form.
- Dickens also uses parallelism or doubles in characters, themes, and settings.

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Group Work 2

- Answer response questions in detailed sentences.
- Be sure to use specific examples from the text.



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Literary Element: Character

- Action
- Speech
- Description
- Commentary
- Round Characters: change, major character, dynamic, focus of conflict and interest, dynamic
- Flat Characters: Do not change, Usually highlight the development of round characters, stereotypes




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Character

| Protagonist | Antagonist | Foil |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| The main character in the story | The character or force that opposes the protagonist | A character who provides a contrast to the protagonist |

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 **Dickens and Character Names**

Dickens used names to communicate something essential about the character.

Stryver Cruncher Lucie


Evremonde Charles Darnay C.D.

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Group Work 3 

- Reflect on the character of Sydney Carton. What type of character is he? Why is he significant to the action of the novel? Discuss!
- Complete Reflection questions. Be sure your answers are detailed and provide specific examples from the text.


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The Bastille 

- Symbol of aristocratic and royal abuses of power
- Lettre de cachet—special orders from the king—used by nobles to imprison troublemakers in their families
- Some prisoners never tried in court—spent rest of their lives in prison.
- Most hated building in France—focus of pent-up rage among the poor.


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Storming the Bastille


- July 14, 1789
- Peasants broke into shops and grabbed weapons
- Attacked the Bastille—a fortress used to hold the King's political enemies
- Soldiers defected and the commander of the Bastille surrendered 

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Group Work 4

- Reflect on the action in Book 2 Chapters 17-24. Discuss.
- Answer the Reflection Questions in completed detailed sentences using examples from the text. 

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The Reign of Terror 

- September 1793-July 1794
- 300,000 people arrested as enemies of revolutionary government
- 17,000 commoners and nobles executed
- Robespierre—mastermind of the Reign of Terror—sickened by blood never attended an execution
- 1794—Members of National Convention realized Reign of Terror out of control and declared Robespierre a tyrant—executed.

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Group Work 5

1. **Discuss the action in Book 3 Chapters 1-9**
2. **Answer the Reflection Questions in completed detailed sentences using examples from the text.**



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The Guillotine

- First used in France in April 1792
- Named for Dr. Joseph Guillotin—thought it most humane and least painful form of execution
- Used in France until 1977 to execute criminals



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Group Work 6

- **Complete the chart. Explain how all of the "mysteries" are solved by the end of the novel.**
- **Answer the Reflection Questions in completed detailed sentences using examples from the text.**



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