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Tale of Two Cities (Dickens)

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A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens, 1859

400-500 pp. (varies by publisher)

Summary

A Tale of Two Cities begins on a muddy English road in an atmosphere charged with mystery and drama, and it ends in the Paris of the French Revolution with one of the most famous acts of self-sacrifice in literature. In between lies one of Charles Dickens's most exciting books—a historical novel that, generation after generation, has given readers access to the profound human dramas that lie behind cataclysmic social and political events.

Famous for the character of Sydney Carton, who sacrifices himself upon the guillotine—"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done"—the novel is also a powerful study of crowd psychology and the dark emotions aroused by the Revolution, and is illuminated by Dickens's lively comedy. (*From Doubleday Knopf.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—February 7, 1812
- Where—Portsmouth, England, UK
- Education—Home and private schooling
- Died—June 9, 1870
- Where—Kent, England

Born on February 7, 1812, Charles Dickens was the second of eight children in a family burdened with financial troubles. Despite difficult early years, he became the most successful British writer of the Victorian age.

In 1824, young Charles was withdrawn from school and forced to work at a boot-blackening factory when his improvident father, accompanied by his mother and siblings, was sentenced to three months in a debtor's prison. Once they were released, Charles attended a private school for three years. The young man then became a solicitor's clerk, mastered shorthand, and before long was employed as a Parliamentary reporter. When he was in his early twenties, Dickens began to publish stories and sketches of London life in a variety of periodicals.

It was the publication of *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) that catapulted the twenty-five-year-old author to national renown. Dickens wrote with unequalled speed and often worked on several novels at a time, publishing them first in monthly installments and then as books. His early novels *Oliver Twist* (1837-1838), *Nicholas*

Nickleby (1838-1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), and *A Christmas Carol* (1843) solidified his enormous, ongoing popularity. As Dickens matured, his social criticism became increasingly biting, his humor dark, and his view of poverty darker still. *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Bleak House* (1852-1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) are the great works of his masterful and prolific period.

In 1858 Dickens's twenty-three-year marriage to Catherine Hogarth dissolved when he fell in love with Ellen Ternan, a young actress. The last years of his life were filled with intense activity: writing, managing amateur theatricals, and undertaking several reading tours that reinforced the public's favorable view of his work but took an enormous toll on his health. Working feverishly to the last, Dickens collapsed and died on June 8, 1870, leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* uncompleted. (From Barnes & Noble Classics.)

Book Reviews

Classic works have few, if any, mainstream press reviews online. See Amazon and Barnes & Noble for helpful customer reviews.

Discussion Questions

1. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with a passage that has become one of English literature's best known: "It was the best of times..." It is a passage well worth parsing. What does Dickens mean by setting the stage with such polarities? For whom was it the best and the worst of times? Dickens also mentions that the era about which he writes was very much "like the present period," which when he was writing meant the late 1850s. Why does this passage continue to be quoted today? In what ways does our own present period merit such an assessment?
2. The novel takes place, per its title, in two cities: London and Paris. What are some of the differences between these two cities? Between their denizens? What about characters who travel—or move residence—from one to another? What about each of the cities themselves: how are they divided in two?
3. Why does Dickens describe Madame Defarge, several times in her early scenes, as seeing nothing? Why does this depiction of her change?
4. Why was Charles Darnay able to see the unfairness of the class structure that privileged him and to extricate himself from it? Are there other characters as capable of seeing beyond their own circumstances?
5. Dickens seems to have great sympathy for the poor, the sick, the powerless, but not all such characters are portrayed sympathetically. What does that say about his sympathies? Where does he intend our—the readers'—sympathies to lie?
6. The news that Doctor Manette, while imprisoned, denounced all the descendents

of the Evrémondes comes as a shock. Given that he saw young Charles and spoke with his beleaguered, compassionate mother—that he, in effect, had reason to have compassion toward them despite the evils of the family—why would he have made such a declaration? What can we make of his repeated claim in the letter read aloud during Darnay's retrial that he was in his right mind? How does he really feel about Darnay and his marriage to Lucie?

7. What is Defarge's motive in betraying Doctor Manette, endangering his daughter and grandchild, and framing Darnay? How might the relationship between Madame and Monsieur be described?

8. Carton's background is alluded to, though we never quite learn the source(s) of his disappointment and degeneracy. What might have happened in his past?

9. Late in the novel, Carton is described as showing both pity and pride. "Pride" is a word we have not heretofore seen associated with Carton, who is full of mostly suppressed regret and anguish over his wasted life. What is Carton proud of, and do others see it? Does Dickens intend to convey that others see his pride?

10. Carton has clearly misused his youthful promise and believes himself to be unredeemable. Does this view of himself actually change, and if so, how? Is Carton a man of faith? Does he become one?

11. Lucie finds "faith" in Carton, described as a "lost man," after he confides in her. Does Lucie come to understand Carton? How? Does she believe that he can be saved from himself?

12. Dickens prefaces the final paragraphs of the novel, which are in Carton's voice, by noting that "if he had given any utterance to his athoughts], and they were prophetic, they would have been these." How might we read the vision expressed in these words? Are we meant to take these thoughts as prophetic—that is, as a portrayal of what actually came after the end of the novel, in both France and in England? Among the beloved friends he has left behind?

13. The vision expressed in Carton's supposed final words includes one for the country and its people after the newest "oppressors" are themselves put to death. What would such a post-Revolution world be like, and how could it be achieved?

14. The French Revolution was of great interest to Americans in the early days of their own republic. Given today's polarities of extreme wealth and poverty and strongly expressed patriotism, as well as the interest in early America, what parallels might we draw between our own time in early twenty-first-century America and what happens in *A Tale of Two Cities*? What lessons?

(Questions issued by Penguin Group USA-Oprah's Book Club edition.)

[top of page \(summary\)](#)



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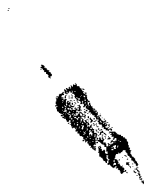
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Full text biography:

Charles Dickens

Birth Date : 1812

Death Date : 1870

Known As : Dickens, Charles John Huffam; Boz

Place of Birth: United Kingdom, Portsmouth

Place of
Death: United Kingdom, Gad's Hill

Nationality : British

Occupation : Novelist

Table of Contents:

[Awards](#)[Personal Information](#)[Career](#)[Writings](#)[Media Adaptions](#)[Sidelights](#)[Related Information](#)

Awards:

Great Expectations was voted one of Britain's 21 best-loved novels by the British public as part of the BBC's The Big Read, 2003.

Personal Information:

Family: Born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England; died of a paralytic stroke, at Gad's Hill, Kent, England, June 9, 1870; buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, June 14, 1870; son of John (a clerk in the Navy Pay Office) and Elizabeth (Barrow) Dickens; married Catherine Hogarth, April, 1836 (separated, 1858); children: ten. Education: Taught at home by mother; attended a Dame School at Chatham for a short time, and Wellington Academy in London; further educated by reading widely in the British Museum.

Career Information:

Novelist, journalist, court reporter, editor, amateur actor. Editor of *London Daily News*, 1846; founder and editor of *Household Words*, 1833-35, and of *All the Year Round*, 1859-70; presented public readings of his works, beginning 1858.

Writings:

- *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, Chapman & Hall, 1837-39, Buccaneer, 1990.
- *Sketches of Young Gentlemen, Dedicated to the Young Ladies*, Chapman & Hall, 1838.
- *Sketches of Young Couples, with an Urgent Remonstrance to the Gentle of England (Being Bachelors or Widowers), on the Present Alarming Crisis*, Chapman & Hall, 1840.
- *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Chapman & Hall, 1841, published as *Master Humphrey's Clock*, Lea & Blanchard, 1841, Buccaneer, 1990.
- *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*, Chapman & Hall, 1841.
- *American Notes for General Circulation*, Chapman & Hall, 1842, Harper, 1842, Fromm, 1985.
- *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, Chapman & Hall, 1842-44, Harper, 1844, Unwin Hyman, 1985.
- *A Christmas Carol, in Prose: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, Chapman & Hall, 1843, Carey & Hart, 1844, Oxford University Press, 1975, original manuscript printed, Dover, 1971.
- *The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells That Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In*, Chapman & Hall, 1845.
- *Pictures from Italy*, Bradbury & Evans, 1846, Ecco Press, 1988, published as *Travelling Letters: Written on the Road*, Wiley & Putnam, 1846.
- *The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home*, Bradbury & Evans, 1846, Chapman & Hall, 1962.

- *The Battle of Life: A Love Story*, Wiley & Putnam, 1847.
- *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son, Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation*, Bradbury & Evans, 1846-48, Wiley & Putnam, 1846-48, Oxford University Press, 1974.
- *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain: A Fancy for Christmas-time*, Bradbury & Evans, 1848, Dutton, 1907.
- *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, Bradbury & Evans, 1849-50, Lea & Blanchard, 1851, Warner Libraries, 1991.
- *A Child's History of England*, Bradbury & Evans, 1852-54, Lea & Blanchard, 1851.
- *Bleak House*, Bradbury & Evans, 1852-53, Harper, 1853, Buccaneer, 1990.
- *Hard Times: For These Times*, Bradbury & Evans, 1854, McElrath, 1854, Barrons, 1985.
- *Little Dorrit*, Bradbury & Evans, 1855-57, Peterson, 1857, Buccaneer, 1990.
- *A Tale of Two Cities*, Chapman & Hall, 1859, Peterson, 1859, Random House, 1990.
- *Great Expectations*, Chapman & Hall, 1861, Peterson, 1861, Harper, 1861, Buccaneer, 1986.
- *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Chapman & Hall, 1861, Sheldon, 1865.
- *Our Mutual Friend*, Chapman & Hall, 1864-65, Harper, 1865, Buccaneer, 1990.
- *Hunted Down: A Story with Some Account of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, The Poisoner*, Hotten, 1870, Peterson, 1870.
- *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Chapman & Hall, 1870, Fields, Osgood, 1870, concluded by Leon Garfield, Pantheon, 1980.
- *A Child's Dream of a Star*, Fields, Osgood, 1871.
- *The Life of Our Lord*, Simon & Schuster, 1934.
- *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, Clarendon Press, 1960.
- *Uncollected Writings from Household Words, 1850-1859*, Allen Lane, 1969.
- *Charles Dickens Book of Memoranda: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile of the Notebook Begun in January 1855*, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Foundation, 1981.
- *A Treasury of Christmas Classics*, H. Shaw Publishers (Wheaton, IL), 1994.
- *The Baron of Grogzwig*, pictures by Rowan Barnes-Murphy, edited by Shirley Greenway, Whispering Coyote Press (Boston), 1994.
- *The Bride's Chamber*, edited with introduction and notes by Harry Stone, illustrated by Kathryn Jacobi, Waxwing Editions (Santa Monica, CA), 1996.

WITH WILLKIE COLLINS

- *Holly Tree Inn*, Household Words, 1855.
- *Wreck of the Golden Mary*, Bradbury & Evans, 1856.
- *Two Apprentices, with a History of Their Lazy Tour*, Peterson, 1857.
- *No Thoroughfare, A Drama in Five Acts*, by Collins, Charles Fechter, and Dickens, De Witt.
- *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens*, Cornell University Press, 1966.

COLLECTIONS

- *Cheap Edition of the Works of Mr. Charles Dickens*, Chapman & Hall, 1847-52, Bradbury & Evans, 1858.
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- *The Nonesuch Edition*, Nonesuch Press, 1937-38.
- *The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens*, Oxford University Press, 1947-58.
- *The Clarendon Dickens*, (5 volumes published), Clarendon Press, 1966.
- *Four Novels*, Gramercy Books (New York City), 1993.
- *Children's Stories from Dickens*, retold by granddaughter Mary Angela Dickens, illustrated by Harold Copping, Derrydale Books (New York City), 1993.

UNDER PSEUDONYM BOZ

- *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*, Macrone, 1837.
- *The Village Coquettes: A Comic Opera in Two Acts*, Bentley, 1836.
- *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, Edited by "Boz,"* Chapman & Hall, 1836-37.
- *The Strange Gentleman: A Comic Burletta in Two Acts*, Chapman & Hall, 1837.
- *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi, Edited by "Boz,"* Bentley, 1838.
- *Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy's Progress, by "Boz,"* Bentley, 1838, Turney, 1838, Oxford University Press, 1966.

Media Adaptions:

Motion pictures based on *A Christmas Carol* have been shown since 1913. Notable among these are the Alistair Sim film *A Christmas Carol* made in 1951 and still shown on television today; a musical version starring Albert Finney and Alec Guinness in 1970; the 1972 United Productions of America film with the animated character Mr. Magoo; and "Mickey's Christmas Carol," with the beloved Disney characters, which has appeared on television since the early 1980s. In 1979 NBC aired an animated special called "The Stingiest Man in Town," featuring the voice of Walter Matthau. In 1984 George C. Scott appeared in a television special of "A Christmas Carol" which has been shown annually since then. A new adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, for the NBC television network and starring Kelsey Grammer, will begin shooting in June 2004.

On television in recent years Masterpiece Theatre has shown "David Copperfield" and "A Tale of Two Cities," Mobil Showcase has featured "Nicholas Nickleby" (which was also presented as a nine-hour show on Broadway), and "Great Expectations" was a feature on the Disney Channel.

In 1934 Freddie Bartholomew, W. C. Fields, and Lionel Barrymore starred in the MGM film *David Copperfield*; it was also filmed in 1972, with Susan Hampshire. *A Tale of Two Cities* appeared on the screen in 1935 with Ronald Coleman, and again in 1957 starring Dirk Bogarde. There have been many versions of *Oliver Twist*, including the 1933 film starring Dickie Moore; the 1951 version with Alec Guinness; and the musical hit *Oliver*, which was first a Broadway show and then a movie with Ron Moody and Jack Wild. In 1947 Jean Simmons and John Mills appeared in a film version of *Great Expectations*. In 1987 English Sands Films produced *Little Dorrit*. *The Pickwick Papers* was filmed in 1955, with Nigel Patrick and Hermione Gingold.

Sidelights:

The very title of this book [*Great Expectations*] indicates the confidence of conscious genius. In a new aspirant for public favor, such a title might have been a good device to attract attention; but the most famous novelist of the day, watched by jealous rivals and critics, could hardly have selected it, had he not inwardly felt the capacity to meet all the expectations he raised. We have read it, as we have read all Mr. Dickens's previous works, as it appeared in instalments, and can testify to the felicity with which expectation was excited and prolonged, and to the series of surprises which accompanied the unfolding of the plot of the story. In no other of his romances has the author succeeded so perfectly in at once stimulating and baffling the curiosity of his readers. He stirred the dultest minds to guess the secret of his mystery; but, so far as we have learned, the guesses of his most intelligent readers have been almost as wide of the mark as those of the least apprehensive. It has been all the more provoking to the former class, that each surprise was the result of art, and not of trick; for a rapid review of previous chapters has shown that the materials of a strictly logical development of the story were freely given. Even after the first, second, third, and even fourth of these surprises gave their pleasing electric shocks to intelligent curiosity, the *denouement* was still hidden, though confidentially foretold. The plot of the romance is therefore universally admitted to be the best that Dickens has ever invented. Its leading events are, as we read the story consecutively, artistically necessary, yet, at the same time, the processes are artistically concealed. We follow the movement of a logic of passion and character, the real premises of which we detect only when we are startled by the conclusions.

The plot of *Great Expectations* is also noticeable as indicating, better than any of his previous stories, the individuality of Dickens's genius. Everybody must have discerned in the action of his mind two diverging tendencies, which, in this novel, are harmonized. He possesses a singularly wide, clear, and minute power of accurate observation, both of things and of persons; but his observation, keen and true to actualities as it independently is, is not a dominant faculty, and is opposed or controlled by the strong tendency of his disposition to pathetic or humorous idealization. Perhaps in *The Old Curiosity Shop* these qualities are best seen in their struggle and divergence, and the result is a magnificent juxtaposition of romantic tenderness, melodramatic improbabilities, and broad farce. The humorous characterization is joyously exaggerated into caricature,—the serious characterization into romantic unreality....

In *Great Expectations*, on the contrary, Dickens seems to have attained the mastery of powers which formerly more or less mastered him. He has fairly discovered that he cannot, like Thackeray, narrate a story as if he were a mere looker-on, a mere "knowing" observer of what he describes and represents, and he has therefore taken observation simply as the basis of his plot and his characterization.... In *Great Expectations* there is shown a power of external observation finer and deeper even than Thackeray's; and yet, owing to the presence of other qualities, the general impression is not one of objective reality. The author palpably uses his observations as materials for his creative faculties to work upon; he does not record, but invents; and he produces something which is natural only under conditions prescribed by his own mind. He shapes, disposes, penetrates, colors, and contrives everything, and the whole action is a series of events which could have occurred only in his own brain, and which it is difficult to conceive of as actually "happening." And yet in none of his other works does he evince a shrewder insight into real life, and a clearer perception and knowledge of what is called "the world." The book is, indeed, an artistic creation, and not a mere succession of humorous and pathetic scenes, and demonstrates that Dickens is now in the prime, and not in the decline of his great powers.

The characters of the novel also show how deeply it has been meditated; for, though none of them may excite the personal interest which clings to Sam Weller or little Dombey, they are better fitted to each other and to the story in which they appear than is usual with Dickens. They all combine to produce that unity of impression which the work leaves on the mind. Individually they will rank among the most original of the author's creations....

The style of the romance is rigorously close to things. The author is so engrossed with the objects before his mind, is so thoroughly in earnest, that he has fewer of those humorous caprices of expression in which formerly he was wont to wanton. Some of the old hilarity and play of fancy is gone, but we hardly miss it in our admiration of the effects produced by his almost stern devotion to the main idea of his work. There are passages of description and narrative in which we are hardly conscious of the words; in our clear apprehension of the objects and incidents they convey. The quotable epithets and phrases are less numerous than in *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield* but the scenes and events impressed on the imagination are perhaps greater in number and more vivid in representation. The poetical element of the writer's genius, his modification of the forms, hues, and sounds of Nature by viewing them through the medium of an imagined mind, is especially prominent throughout the descriptions with which the work abounds. Nature is not only described, but individualized and humanized.

Altogether we take great joy in recording our conviction that *Great Expectations* is a masterpiece.... In our opinion, *Great Expectations* is a work which proves that we may expect from Dickens a series of romances far exceeding in power and artistic skill the productions which have already given him such a preeminence among the novelists of the age....

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- Foor, Sheila M., *Dickens' Rhetoric*, P. Lang (New York City), 1993.
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Home → SparkNotes → Literature Study Guides → A Tale of Two Cities → Study Questions & Essay Topics

CONTENTS

General Info

[Context](#)
[Plot Overview](#)
[Character List](#)
[Analysis of Major Characters](#)
[Themes, Motifs & Symbols](#)

Summary & Analysis

[Preface](#)
[Book the First: Recalled to Life Chapters 1-4](#)
[Book the First: Recalled to Life Chapters 5-6](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 1-4](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 5-6](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 7-9](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 10-13](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 14-17](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 18-21](#)
[Book the Second: The Golden Thread Chapters 22-24](#)
[Book the Third: The Track of a Storm Chapters 1-5](#)
[Book the Third: The Track of a Storm Chapters 6-10](#)

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Charles Dickens

← Study Questions & Essay Topics

Study Questions

1.
Discuss at least one way in which Dickens parallels the personal and the political in A Tale of Two Cities.

In his dual focus on the French Revolution and the individual lives of his characters, Dickens draws many comparisons between the historical developments taking place and the characters' triumphs and travails. Perhaps the most direct example of this parallel comes in the final chapter of the novel, in which Dickens matches Sydney Carton's death with the French Revolution's most frenzied violence, linking the two through the concept of resurrection.

Throughout the novel, Carton struggles to free himself from a life of apathy and meaninglessness while the French lower classes fight for political emancipation. Each of these struggles involves death—Carton decides to give his life so that Charles Darnay may escape, and the revolutionaries make a spectator sport out of the execution of aristocrats. Still, each struggle holds the promise of renewed life. Nowhere is this promise more evident than in the prophecy that the narrator ascribes to Carton at the novel's end. Here, Carton envisions a new city rising up from the ashes of the ruined Paris as clearly as he sees Lucie, Darnay, and their son celebrating and extending his life as a man of worth and honor. Dickens thus closes his novel with a note of triumphant hope both political and personal.

2. One of the novel's most important motifs is the figure of the double. What is the effect of Dickens's doubling technique? Does he use doubles to draw contrasts, comparisons, or both?

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From early on in the novel, various characters seemed paired as opposites. Darnay, for instance, appears capable and accomplished, while Carton seems lazy and lacks ambition. Similarly, Miss Pross represents respectable English order while Madame Defarge embodies its opposite: hot-blooded revolution. As the novel progresses, however, these doubled characters come to relate more as twins than as opposites. Both Carton and Darnay share a common love for Lucie, and Lucie exerts a power over Carton that enables him to shed his skin as a "jackal" and adopt a life that actually may exceed Darnay's in terms of devotion and heroism. A common ground exists even between Miss Pross and Madame Defarge. The two women share a sense of uncompromising duty, as becomes manifest in their confrontation in Lucie's apartment. Miss Pross proves as fiercely devoted to Lucie's life and safety as Madame Defarge is to the idea of a new French Republic purged of all aristocrats. Each is willing to give up her life for her beliefs. In revealing these resemblances, Dickens suggests that even seeming opposites can possess underlying similarities. This gesture, along with Dickens's inclusion of multiple coincidences in his plot, contributes to the author's larger message that human beings inhabit a world of multiple hidden patterns and connections.

3. Discuss Dickens's use of foreshadowing in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens makes frequent use of foreshadowing, as it allows him to build suspense throughout his narrative and imbue it with a haunting atmosphere. He fills the novel with details that anticipate future events. For example, the wine cask breaking in the street and the echoing footsteps that can be heard in the Manettes' apartment hint to the reader about the imminence of the great and violent mob that eventually overtakes Paris. In this way, the reader becomes more aware of the situation than Dickens's characters and feels ever more emotionally and psychologically involved in the narrative. Given that Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities* in short, weekly installments, this technique was a particularly effective means of sustaining the reader's interest in the novel. The reader was teased by hints of terrific events on the horizon and satisfied only by reading (and first buying) further installments.

Suggested Essay Topics

1. Some critics charge that Dickens, in much of his work, failed to create meaningful characters because he exaggerated them to parodic extremes. Do you find this a fair assessment of his characterization in *A Tale of Two Cities*? Does the author's use of caricature detract from his novel's ability to speak to human nature?
2. Dickens relies heavily on coincidence to fuel the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities*: letters are found bearing crucial information, for example, and long-lost brothers are discovered in crowded public places. Do such incidents strengthen or weaken the plot and overall themes of the novel?

ancient cave
paintings



GROUND
CONTROL TO
MAJOR TOM

The biggest
"thank you
*cough*not*co
ugh*"s in
history

HE MINDHUT

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Disney
characters as
hipsters



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These foods
will KILL YOU



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annoying
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characters
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Pets dressed
up for
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most badass
wizards of all
time



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Halloween

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3. Discuss Dickens's attitude toward the French Revolution.
Does he sympathize with the revolutionaries?

4. Based on Dickens's portrayals of the villainous characters in his novel (particularly Madame Defarge), what conclusions might the reader draw about the author's notions of human evil? Does he seem to think that people are born evil? If so, do they lack the ability to change? Or does he suggest that circumstances drive human beings to their acts of cruelty?

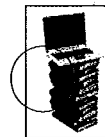
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READERS' NOTES

Most Helpful Readers' Notes
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Doubles

by SCRAPYCOCO, December 18, 2012

Charles Darnay= Charles Dickens

Jerry Cruncher= Jesus Christ

8 Comments 63 out of 269 people found this helpful

Paradox

by KAYKAY2016, February 25, 2013

Book the First: Chapter 1: The first sentence is an amazing paradox!!!

2 Comments 18 out of 33 people found this helpful

Trailer

by WHATHASTHEWORLDCOMETO, March 25, 2013

I found a great summary trailer of A Tale of Two Cities on Youtube! >> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LA10a83qY6A>

0 Comments 6 out of 12 people found this helpful



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