

Introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities*

CHARLES DICKENS wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* as a warning to the British people that the events in France could very well happen in the British Isles. As an admirer of Thomas Carlyle and being a disciple of Carlyle's transcendentalism, Dickens concentrated his writings on the reformation of British society by attacking its shortcomings, particularly the inequalities of social classes and the use of prisons for debts and politics.

Since Dickens wrote this novel as a monthly serial, there is a definite quick pace to it. Every chapter seems to have a cliffhanger that compels the reader to continue reading in order to see what happens next. While the novel can be accused of being melodramatic at times, overall the work is realistic and has the rare quality of appealing to both the mind and the soul.

The two countries of France and England seemingly do not share anything in common. However, this perception is wrong, because both countries were on the verge of self-destruction. One of the many motifs in the novel centers on the need for redemption, whether on the personal or national level. For France, redemption would come by the shedding of blood. On the other hand, Dickens expresses well that a true redemption is accomplished through love, a love that is centered on friendship, family, and sacrifice. The mark of a nation is the unity of a people, who share a common memory and a desire to preserve those memories. But in order to preserve these memories, there must be a willingness on the part of the people to sacrifice in order that their nation may continue into the next generation. Without a willingness to transmit the past memories to the next generation, a people can no longer be called a nation.

The French Revolution destroyed the essence of nationhood when all commonality of purpose was eliminated. With the execution of their king and the eradication of their religion, the people of France broke from their past culture and history. While there existed a mock comradeship, everyone suspected his neighbor, and thousands of innocent people were sent to their deaths. England was no better, and Dickens tries to show this distrust early in the novel, where the English travelers were both physically and emotionally bundled up. Nations cannot exist when neighbors spy on neighbors, and when the people are controlled by terror rather than by mutual cooperation and respect. When neighbors have to be unified by force, they are no longer a nation, but have become a political State, where all relationships are determined by law, and not by family or culture.

The greatest value to be learned about the French Revolution is whenever a people rejects its religious and cultural traditions, there is nothing for anyone to fall back to. While no one can deny that the French policies were in need of reform, by their casting aside their past, the French lost their national soul.

A Synopsis of the French Revolution

TO understand some of the events in *A Tale of Two Cities*, a cursory look at the events during the French Revolution will be beneficial to the student. Ironically, it was the nobility that started the revolution in 1789 by forcing the king to reconvene the Estates-General, a legislative body that had been idle since 1614. France had three "estates": First Estate (clergy), Second Estate, (nobility), and Third Estate (middle class and peasants). The passage of laws required two of the three estates to vote for the new law. In other words, the Estates-General used the concept of concurrent majorities, rather than a simple majority. This represents an effective way to preserve the rights of the minority, but in this case, the clergy and nobility had shared interests and consistently blocked the reforms demanded by the Third Estate. Because the legislature was

ineffectual, the Third Estate separated from the Estates-General and declared the “National Assembly” to be the legitimate representative of the people of France. King Louis XVI reluctantly agreed to recognize the National Assembly, because he was unwilling to use troops against the representatives of the Third Estate, which had been joined by many of the clergy and a few of the nobles.

When Louis XVI hired mercenaries to guard Paris and Versailles, he committed a tactical error, because this action gave credence to the rumor that the king was going to destroy the National Assembly. This led to the attack on the Bastille, a fortress prison that housed only seven prisoners. Mobs began to murder landowners, noblemen, and clergymen in surrounding provinces. Many chateaus as well as factories were looted and burned. This uprising has been called the “Great Fear.”

This mayhem eventually led to the formation of a constitution in 1791 that changed France from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one. Again, Louis XVI blunders by not working with the National Assembly toward legitimate reform. But even the rural peasants were unhappy with the new government, which was created by middle-class merchants and lawyers, who did not represent the agrarian class. While many of the taxes were abolished, bringing some relief to the city dwellers, the remaining taxes did not help the farmers, who now had to pay the taxes in cash, and not with crops as before. Since money was difficult to obtain, the majority of the small farmers refused to submit to the taxes. But now the city folks were becoming dissatisfied with the new government as well. Unemployment was rising, and the urbanites were easily aroused to violence, as shown in the case of the storming of the Bastille.

However, what caused the downfall of the constitutional monarchy was the declaration of war by Austria and Prussia against France. Leopold II of Austria was the brother of France’s queen, Marie Antoinette, and he was naturally concerned for her safety. With the “Declaration of Pillnitz” (1791), Leopold stated that the restoration of absolutism in France was of “common interest to all sovereigns of Europe,” thus starting a war with France. All of the factions in France looked forward to the war. Of course the king hoped to seize power again, while the radicals were thinking that the king would be completely discredited as the result of the war. As it turned out, the latter result happened. The radical republicans of the Paris Commune drafted a new constitution that declared France to be a republic and established the “National Convention.” Georges Jacques Danton became the head of the new government. With the fall of Verdun, the French rushed troops to meet the invaders. Back in Paris however, anyone suspected of being a royalist was killed. Nearly 2,000 people lost their lives during the five-day slaughter.

The National Convention survived for about three years (1792–1795). During this period, Danton was able to better equip the army, and it began to have a measure of success in the war with Prussia and Austria. But in January, 1793, Louis XVI was executed. Shortly after the execution, England, Spain, Holland, and Sardinia joined Prussia and Austria, by forming the First Coalition against the French Republic. In addition to this outside pressure, an internal conflict began to grow within the National Convention. Even though they were both revolutionaries, the Girondists and the Jacobins had a falling out, and the radical Jacobins won the struggle for power in the end by getting rid of their rival moderates. Many of the Girondists fled to the countryside where they organized a farmers’ resistance. This resistance was supported by the Catholic royalists as well, whose churches were confiscated and desecrated.

To meet this threat, the National Convention established the Committee of Public Safety, consisting of twelve men. Anyone who was of noble birth, had contact with an émigré, or who could not produce a certificate of citizenship was to be arrested. Thus began the “Reign of Terror.” In a fifteen-month period, 5,000 victims were guillotined in Paris alone, while 20,000

persons were executed in the various rural villages. By early 1794, any justification for the Reign of Terror had ended. Most of the Girondists as well as Maria Antoinette were executed. However, Maximilien Robespierre gained control of the important Committee of Public Safety and had become the most powerful man in the government. The revolution transformed itself into a snake that began to eat its tail. The French people looked on helplessly as courageous leaders of the early days of the revolution were sent to the guillotine, because they disagreed with Robespierre. Included among the executed was Danton. At last, being sick of the bloodshed, the National Convention arrested Robespierre as a “terrorist” along with twenty-one of his closest associates, and sent them to the guillotine, whose death ended the Reign of Terror. Thousands of prisoners were released, the Paris Commune was broken up, and the powers of the Committee of Public Safety were curtailed. There then arose a reaction against the radicals. In the rural provinces, a “White Terror” forced many radical republicans to flee for their lives, many coming to New England in the United States. The churches in France were reopened, and except for France’s war with the First Coalition, the lives of the people returned to a bit of normalcy.

Even though it began as a feud between the aristocracy and the monarchy, the French Revolution, in the end, pitted an industrialized, radical citizenry against its agrarian counterpart. What was overthrown was an agrarian tradition where economics and politics were decentralized, and this tradition was replaced by a centralized, all-powerful State that usurped all of the functions in society, including politics and religion. Later, two countries would have their own revolutions which would have the same consequence of destroying their agrarian cultures and by replacing them with a centralized, industrialized State: the industrialized United States of America that invaded and conquered the agrarian Confederate States of America and industrialized Bolshevik Russia that invaded and conquered the agrarian provinces of White Russia.

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A Tale of Two Cities
Lesson One

1.1 Vocabulary

pincers *n.*

capitulate *v.*

evinced *v.*

cadaverous *adj.*

1.2 Vocabulary Exercise

1. What Tina remembered the most about the poor man, who was lost for two weeks in the forest, was his _____ face; it was pale and gray, and he looked much like a skeleton.
2. When the opposing commander realized that his troops were surrounded and that further resistance would be futile, he decided to _____ and accept the enemy's terms of surrender.
3. In order to remove the hot metal from the flame, the blacksmith had to use _____ in order not to get burned.
4. No matter how you justify your actions, you will never _____ trust by not being completely honest with your friends.

1.3 Reading Assignment: *A Tale of Two Cities*, Book 1, Chapters 1–4

1.4 Recall Questions

1. What is the year when the narrator begins his tale?
2. To what does the narrator refer to when he says, “there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by the woodman...”?
3. What did the two kings carry with “a high hand”?
4. What were the feelings of the men in the mail coach toward each other?
5. What message does Jerry give to Mr. Lorry?
6. What answer does Mr. Lorry give to Jerry?
7. What does Mr. Lorry dream about in the coach?
8. How old is Lucie when Mr. Lorry first meets her?

9. How old was Lucie when Mr. Lorry took her to England?

10. What news does Mr. Lorry give Lucie about her father?

1.5 Critical Thinking

- Discuss Dickens's showing how the authoritarianism in France is the same as the near anarchy in England.
- While Mr. Lorry tries his best to convince himself that he is merely a man of business, explain how his actions reveal that he is a man of tact, understanding, and compassion.

1.6 Bonus Thoughts

- **Foreshadowing:** When Jerry becomes anxious because of Mr. Lorry's message, "Recalled to Life," Dickens is offering an obscure glimpse about Jerry Cruncher and the motif of resurrection. Note carefully the character of Jerry, particularly his attitude towards prayer. Also, another example of foreshadowing is the reference to the "certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it."
- **The Monarchs of England and France:** Dickens does not name the two monarchs in his tale. The two monarchs in 1775 were King George III of England and Louis XVI of France.