

BA ENGLISH

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FICTION – II

A TALE OF TWO CITIES – CHARLES DICKENS

A Tale of Two Cities is a famous novel by Dickens. It portrays the lives and events of the time of the French Revolution. Though the French Revolution promised –liberty, equality and fraternity, later it became bloody in nature which horrified writers like Wordsworth. During the revolution, many innocents too were killed. Dickens has given a faithful picture of the revolution in his novel.

Summary :

The year is 1775, and social ills plague both France and England. Jerry Cruncher, an odd-job man who works for Tellson's Bank, stops the Dover mail-coach with an urgent message for Jarvis Lorry. The message instructs Lorry to wait at Dover for a young woman, and Lorry responds with the cryptic words, "Recalled to Life." At Dover, Lorry is met by Lucie Manette, a young orphan whose father, a once-eminent doctor whom she supposed dead, has been discovered in France. Lorry escorts Lucie to Paris, where they meet Defarge, a former servant of Doctor Manette, who has kept Manette safe in a garret. Driven mad by eighteen years in the Bastille, Manette spends all of his time making shoes, a hobby he learned while in prison. Lorry assures Lucie that her love and devotion can recall her father to life, and indeed they do.

The year is now 1780. Charles Darnay stands accused of treason against the English crown. A bombastic lawyer named Stryver pleads Darnay's case, but it is not until his drunk, good-for-nothing colleague, Sydney Carton, assists him that the court acquits Darnay. Carton clinches his argument by pointing out that he himself bears an uncanny resemblance to the defendant, which undermines the prosecution's case for unmistakably identifying Darnay as the

spy the authorities spotted. Lucie and Doctor Manette watched the court proceedings, and that night, Carton escorts Darnay to a tavern and asks how it feels to receive the sympathy of a woman like Lucie. Carton despises and resents Darnay because he reminds him of all that he himself has given up and might have been.

In France, the cruel Marquis Evrémonte runs down a plebian child with his carriage. Manifesting an attitude typical of the aristocracy in regard to the poor at that time, the Marquis shows no regret, but instead curses the peasantry and hurries home to his chateau, where he awaits the arrival of his nephew, Darnay, from England. Arriving later that night, Darnay curses his uncle and the French aristocracy for its abominable treatment of the people. He renounces his identity as an Evrémonte and announces his intention to return to England. That night, the Marquis is murdered; the murderer has left a note signed with the nickname adopted by French revolutionaries: “Jacques.”

A year passes, and Darnay asks Manette for permission to marry Lucie. He says that, if Lucie accepts, he will reveal his true identity to Manette. Carton, meanwhile, also pledges his love to Lucie, admitting that, though his life is worthless, she has helped him dream of a better, more valuable existence. On the streets of London, Jerry Cruncher gets swept up in the funeral procession for a spy named Roger Cly. Later that night, he demonstrates his talents as a “Resurrection-Man,” sneaking into the cemetery to steal and sell Cly’s body. In Paris, meanwhile, another English spy known as John Barsad drops into Defarge’s wine shop. Barsad hopes to turn up evidence concerning the mounting revolution, which is still in its covert stages. Madame Defarge sits in the shop knitting a secret registry of those whom the revolution seeks to execute. Back in London, Darnay, on the morning of his wedding, keeps his promise to Manette;

he reveals his true identity and, that night, Manette relapses into his old prison habit of making shoes. After nine days, Manette regains his presence of mind, and soon joins the newlyweds on their honeymoon. Upon Darnay's return, Carton pays him a visit and asks for his friendship. Darnay assures Carton that he is always welcome in their home.

The year is now 1789. The peasants in Paris storm the Bastille and the French Revolution begins. The revolutionaries murder aristocrats in the streets, and Gabelle, a man charged with the maintenance of the Evrémonde estate, is imprisoned. Three years later, he writes to Darnay, asking to be rescued. Despite the threat of great danger to his person, Darnay departs immediately for France.

As soon as Darnay arrives in Paris, the French revolutionaries arrest him as an emigrant. Lucie and Manette make their way to Paris in hopes of saving him. Darnay remains in prison for a year and three months before receiving a trial. In order to help free him, Manette uses his considerable influence with the revolutionaries, who sympathize with him for having served time in the Bastille. Darnay receives an acquittal, but that same night he is arrested again. The charges, this time, come from Defarge and his vengeful wife. Carton arrives in Paris with a plan to rescue Darnay and obtains the help of John Barsad, who turns out to be Solomon Pross, the long-lost brother of Miss Pross, Lucie's loyal servant.

At Darnay's trial, Defarge produces a letter that he discovered in Manette's old jail cell in the Bastille. The letter explains the cause of Manette's imprisonment. Years ago, the brothers Evrémonde (Darnay's father and uncle) enlisted Manette's medical assistance. They asked him to tend to a woman, whom one of the brothers had raped, and her brother, whom the same brother had stabbed fatally. Fearing that Manette might report their misdeeds, the Evrémondes

had him arrested. Upon hearing this story, the jury condemns Darnay for the crimes of his ancestors and sentences him to die within twenty-four hours. That night, at the Defarge's wine shop, Carton overhears Madame Defarge plotting to have Lucie and her daughter (also Darnay's daughter) executed as well; Madame Defarge, it turns out, is the surviving sibling of the man and woman killed by the Evrémondes. Carton arranges for the Manettes' immediate departure from France. He then visits Darnay in prison, tricks him into changing clothes with him, and, after dictating a letter of explanation, drugs his friend unconscious. Barsad carries Darnay, now disguised as Carton, to an awaiting coach, while Carton, disguised as Darnay, awaits execution. As Darnay, Lucie, their child, and Dr. Manette speed away from Paris, Madame Defarge arrives at Lucie's apartment, hoping to arrest her. There she finds the supremely protective Miss Pross. A scuffle ensues, and Madame Defarge dies by the bullet of her own gun. Sydney Carton meets his death at the guillotine, and the narrator confidently asserts that Carton dies with the knowledge that he has finally imbued his life with meaning.

Sydney Carton : Sydney Carton is a bundle of virtues and weaknesses. He is a doomed lover who sacrifices his life for the sake of his love for Lucy. Carton proves the most dynamic character in *A Tale of Two Cities*. He first appears as a lazy, alcoholic attorney who cannot muster even the smallest amount of interest in his own life. He describes his existence as a supreme waste of life and takes every opportunity to declare that he cares for nothing and no one. But the reader senses, even in the initial chapters of the novel, that Carton in fact feels something that he perhaps cannot articulate. In his conversation with the recently acquitted Charles Darnay, Carton's comments about Lucie Manette, while bitter and sardonic,

betray his interest in, and budding feelings for, the gentle girl. Eventually, Carton reaches a point where he can admit his feelings to Lucie herself. Before Lucie weds Darnay, Carton professes his love to her, though he still persists in seeing himself as essentially worthless. This scene marks a vital transition for Carton and lays the foundation for the supreme sacrifice that he makes at the novel's end.

Carton's death has provided much material for scholars and critics of Dickens's novel. Some readers consider it the inevitable conclusion to a work obsessed with the themes of redemption and resurrection. According to this interpretation, Carton becomes a Christ-like figure, a selfless martyr whose death enables the happiness of his beloved and ensures his own immortality. Other readers, however, question the ultimate significance of Carton's final act. They argue that since Carton initially places little value on his existence, the sacrifice of his life proves relatively easy. However, Dickens's frequent use in his text of other resurrection imagery—his motifs of wine and blood, for example—suggests that he did intend for Carton's death to be redemptive, whether or not it ultimately appears so to the reader. As Carton goes to the guillotine, the narrator tells us that he envisions a beautiful, idyllic Paris “rising from the abyss” and sees “the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.” Just as the apocalyptic violence of the revolution precedes a new society's birth, perhaps it is only in the sacrifice of his life that Carton can establish his life's great worth.

Dr. Manette : He is the father of Lucie and father-in-law of Charles Darnay. Dickens uses Doctor Manette to illustrate one of the dominant motifs of the novel: the essential mystery that surrounds every human being. As Jarvis Lorry makes his way toward France to recover Manette,

the narrator reflects that “every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.” For much of the novel, the cause of Manette’s incarceration remains a mystery both to the other characters and to the reader. Even when the story concerning the evil Marquis Evrémonde comes to light, the conditions of Manette’s imprisonment remain hidden. Though the reader never learns exactly how Manette suffered, his relapses into trembling sessions of shoemaking evidence the depth of his misery.

Like Carton, Manette undergoes a drastic change over the course of the novel. He is transformed from an insensate prisoner who mindlessly cobbles shoes into a man of distinction. The contemporary reader tends to understand human individuals not as fixed entities but rather as impressionable and reactive beings, affected and influenced by their surroundings and by the people with whom they interact. In Dickens’s age, however, this notion was rather revolutionary. Manette’s transformation testifies to the tremendous impact of relationships and experience on life. The strength that he displays while dedicating himself to rescuing Darnay seems to confirm the lesson that Carton learns by the end of the novel—that not only does one’s treatment of others play an important role in others’ personal development, but also that the very worth of one’s life is determined by its impact on the lives of others.
