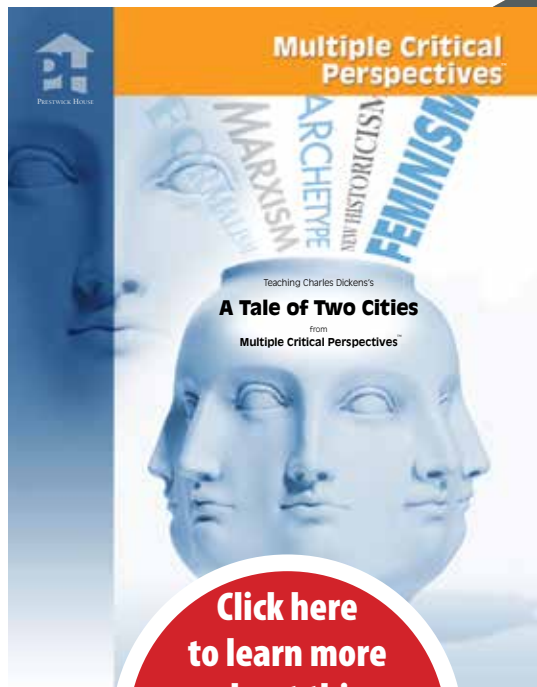




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Teaching Charles Dickens's

A Tale of Two Cities

from

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by

Douglas Grudzina

Edited by Paul Moliken



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General Introduction to the Work

Synopsis

Book I: Recalled to Life

THE NOVEL BEGINS IN 1775 with a description of the contrasts and contradictions of values and lifestyles that make up the “current” age. In both England and France, there is the possibility of revolution simmering.

On a dark, rainy night, a mysterious passenger (Jarvis Lorry) on the mail coach to Dover receives an even more mysterious message to which he responds, “Recalled to life.” In his troubled dreams, he repeats a conversation in which he is addressing a man who has been “buried” for eighteen years and is now being resurrected. In Dover, he meets Lucie Manette, the daughter of a French physician long thought dead. He reveals to Lucie that her father is not dead but has been imprisoned in the Bastille in France for these past eighteen years. He has been recently released, and they are to go to Paris together to meet him.

In Paris, they meet Ernest and Terese Defarge who own the wine shop and who have taken in Doctor Manette since his release from prison. As a young man, Defarge was Doctor Manette’s servant, and he is still loyal to his former employer. Doctor Manette is shown to be a mere shell of a man, barely conscious of his surroundings. He only slowly recognizes Mr. Lorry and Lucie. He has spent his eighteen years in prison making shoes. Because it is probably not safe for Doctor Manette to remain in France, Lucie, Lorry, and the Defarges hurry him out.

Book II: The Golden Thread

Five years have passed, and we see Lucie, the Doctor, and Mr. Lorry as they testify at the treason trial of a Frenchman, Charles Darnay. Darnay had been kind to them and helpful to Doctor Manette on their crossing from France five years earlier. Several spies perjure themselves to assist the state in convicting Darnay, but the charges are dropped when Sydney Carton, the assistant to Darnay’s attorney, establishes how closely he and Darnay resemble one another.

As time passes, Lorry, Darnay, and Carton become frequent visitors of the Manette household. Both Darnay and Carton love Lucie, but Carton knows that he will never win Lucie’s love because he has wasted his life and has nothing to endear himself to another. He does, however, promise Lucie that he would do anything – even sacrifice his life – in order to keep those whom Lucie loved near her.

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Tale of Two Cities*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgement. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men – whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all – Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Activity One

Comparing Lucie Manette Darnay and Madame Defarge

1. Have students reread the following passages:
 - Book I, Chapter 4 – Introduction to Lucie Chapter 5 – Introduction to Madame Defarge
 - Book III, Chapter 5 – Madame Defarge and Lucie's encounter, Lucie's plea and Defarge's response
 - Book III, Chapter 10 – The dying boy's story to Doctor Manette
 - Book III, Chapter 12 – Madame Defarge's revelation to her husband
2. There are no specific chapters or scenes that reveal Lucie's backstory, but have students reconstruct it from clues throughout the book..
3. Then have students answer the following questions in discussion:
 - who has power/control?
 - who is the better developed character?
 - who has Dickens' sympathy? How do you know?
 - who has the reader's sympathy? Why?

Marxist Criticism Applied to *A Tale of Two Cities*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society – whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands of those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious – Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society – social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



Activity One

Examining the Book for Evidence of Dickens' Social Convictions

1. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Assign half of the groups to examine the novel for evidence that Dickens *did* support the goals of the French Revolution. Assign the other half to examine the novel for evidence that Dickens did *not* support the Revolution. In their examination of the book, have students consider the following:
 - From which class (proletariat or bourgeoisie) do the majority of the characters come?
 - From which class do each of the following characters come?
 - Lucie
 - Dr. Manette
 - Miss Pross
 - Mr. Lorry
 - Sydney Carton
 - Stryver
 - Charles Darnay
 - Jerry Cruncher
 - Ernest Defarge
 - Madame Defarge
 - The Vengeance
 - the mender of roads/wood-sawyer
 - From which class are the characters more interesting?
 - Better developed (multiple traits, adequate backstory, etc.)?
 - More sympathetic?
2. What language does Dickens use to describe each class?(Note: Make certain you consider English characters and actions in England as well as French.)
 - To which class would Dickens feel he belonged?
3. Reconvene the class and have all of the “pro” groups report. Then have all of the “con” groups report.
4. In full-class discussion, examine which group(s) make the better case. It is *not* necessary to come to consensus.

New Historicism Applied to *A Tale of Two Cities*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Activity One

Examining the Text for Evidence of Dickens' National Pride

1. In full-class discussion, determine which characters are French and which are British.
2. Divide the class into groups of two, three or four. Assign to each group one of the following:
 - In terms of the central crisis of the novel – Darnay's arrest and threatened execution – which characters are ultimately part of the solution and which are ultimately part of the problem?
 - How helpful and competent are Lucie and Dr. Manette in effecting Charles Darnay's ultimate safety?
 - Describe the role Mr. Lorry has played in the lives of Lucie and the Doctor – from even before the opening of the story. Cite specific passages from the novel to support and illustrate your claim.
 - In both London and Paris, what is the one institution that comes to represent stability? Find the specific passages in the book where this is suggested.
 - Compare and contrast the emotional and psychological motivations for the actions of:
 - Sydney Carton
 - Miss Pross
 - Mr. Lorry
 - Madame Defarge
 - Ernest Defarge
 - The Vengeance
3. Reconvene the class and allow each group report its findings and decision to the class. In class discussion, examine whether Dickens seems to be pro-French, pro-British, or neutral.