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A Tale of Two Cities
Charles Dickens



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A Tale of Two Cities

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

A Tale of Two Cities

Background

1. What do you think of when you think of Charles Dickens? Why? Jot down some notes on your prior knowledge of Dickens and his works. Compare your ideas and facts with those of your classmates.
2. What are the two cities of the title? Why do you think Dickens chose them? Answer these questions in a few sentences.
3. *A Tale of Two Cities* was Dickens's personal favorite among his novels. What is the best thing you have ever written? Bring in a copy to share with the class, or if it's a long piece of writing, summarize it for the class in one or two pages.

Preface

4. Dickens gives credit to his sources, a play by Wilkie Collins and a history of the French Revolution by Thomas Carlyle, both of which had a great impact on him personally and professionally. In your personal experience, what is the book or play that has had the most influence on you? How? Why? Write a brief description of this work and then explain its impact on you.

Chapter VII

23. Marquis Evrémonde, clearly one of the villains in the novel, allows his driver to proceed recklessly through the crowded streets of Paris: “With a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration not easy to be understood in these days, the carriage dashed through streets and swept round corners, with women screaming before it, and men clutching each other and clutching children out of its way. At last, swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt, and there was a loud cry from a number of voices, and the horses reared and plunged. But for the latter inconvenience, the carriage probably would not have stopped...” A young boy has been killed. After tossing some coins to the dead child’s father, Evrémonde rushes on.

Rewrite the scene in a modern setting, imagining what might happen if such an event occurred in Manhattan today, with the carriage being a limousine owned by a rock star or a sports celebrity.

Chapter VIII

24. How does the Marquis and his careless, callous treatment of the peasants fit in with the overall message of the novel? Try to put the theme—as you understand it so far—into a sentence, then be ready to explain and discuss your idea with your classmates. Revise your concept of the theme as you progress through the novel, then discuss (and/or write about) the theme again as a part of the wrap-up process. How and why did your ideas about the theme change?

Chapter XI

29. Here is a humorous exchange between Mr. Stryver and Sydney Carton:
“I have been ashamed of you, Sydney!”
“It should be very beneficial to a man in your practice at the bar, to be ashamed of anything,” returned Sydney; “you ought to be much obliged to me.”

Where is the humor in Carton’s reply? What is the larger target of Dickens’s satire? Explain the joke to a classmate and prepare to discuss it with the class. Is this type of humor aimed at this particular target still popular today? Why or why not?

30. Stryver confidently announces his plans to marry Lucie, then gives Carton some advice: “Marry. Provide somebody to take care of you. Never mind your having no enjoyment of women’s society, nor understanding of it, nor tact for it. Find out somebody. Find out some respectable woman with a little property—somebody in the landlady way, or lodging-letting way—and marry her, against a rainy day.”

Write a letter to a friend offering advice on his or her future, taking into account marriage, children, and career choice. Your letter can be polite, helpful, and serious, or you could choose to write a humorous, satirical letter while ensuring that your words are not truly offensive or hurtful.

Chapter XVI

35. John Barsad and Roger Cly have apparently been spies, and Charles Darnay has been accused of being one. The gathering of intelligence, especially about politics or possible violence, has long been a significant national and international concern. Imagine that you have been spying on the Defarges since the beginning of the story, and write a report for your supervisor in which you provide details as to what the Defarges and their friends are doing and planning.

Chapter XVII

36. Perhaps the most appealing and deeply emotional bond in the book is that between Lucie and her father. Even as she is preparing to marry Darnay, Lucie tells her father that “if my life were not to be still consecrated to you, or if my marriage were so arranged as that it would part us, even by the length of a few of these streets, I should be ...unhappy and self-reproachful...”

Canadian poet Rod McKuen once said, “All literature is a search for the father.” In what sense do Lucie, Darnay, and Carton all find a father in this novel? Write a journal entry on this topic and agree or disagree with McKuen’s statement.

Book the Third, Chapter I

45. After Darnay is captured by revolutionaries in France, Defarge says he is surprised that Darnay would risk traveling there in the time of “La Guillotine.” In 1789, Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin proposed what became known as the guillotine, named after him, as a means of quick and painless execution—instead of hanging, which was often inefficient. (Foulon had to be hanged three times before he died.) A 1791 law made the guillotine the only official means of capital punishment in France.

However, the deaths by decapitation proved gruesome because the brain stays alive for a while after the head is removed—reliable estimates range from 3 to 40 seconds. In fact, there are several stories of people whose eyes blinked and stared “normally” and whose faces changed expressions after their heads were cut off. Write a poem or a short story on this subject.

Chapter II

46. Because of his history as a Bastille prisoner, Manette believes that he can help rescue Darnay. In a paragraph or two, without reading ahead, predict what is going to happen to Darnay and how he will react to it.