Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for…

A Tale of Two Cities
by Charles Dickens

written by Jack Turner

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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.
Book the First, Chapter I

5. As Dickens indicates in the first paragraph, the late eighteenth century was a time of radical change: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

Freewrite for 10 minutes about what you know, think, and feel about a time of radical change. You may choose to discuss a war, a civil rights issue, or other topic that caused a significant change in society.

6. Dickens says that the time period of the novel is somewhat like the “present period,” meaning the mid 1800s. For example, Charles Darwin published his blockbuster on evolution, On the Origin of Species, in late 1859, at almost exactly the same time that A Tale of Two Cities was released. Science and technology were making great strides, which caused many people to question their beliefs and values. Write and deliver a speech on how our current society also reflects both the 18th-century environment of the novel and the 19th-century era in which it was published.

7. What does Dickens mean when he says that some “authorities insisted on [the era] being received…in the superlative degree of comparison only”? Explain his vocabulary usage to a classmate.
**Chapter II**

8. In this chapter, titled “The Mail,” Jarvis Lorry receives a cryptic written message, delivered by Jerry Cruncher: “Wait at Dover for Mam’selle.” In return, Lorry gives Cruncher a verbal reply that is even shorter: “Recalled to Life,” which we later learn has a tremendous amount of meaning for the Manette family.

In a few paragraphs describe how the importance of old-fashioned mail has decreased with the advent of the cell phone, email, and instant messaging. Is this development an improvement? If so, why? If not, why not?

**Chapter III**

9. What is the main example of foreshadowing in this chapter? How does foreshadowing help readers comprehend the plot? How does it add excitement? What does this particular example of foreshadowing refer to and prefigure? Why do you think Dickens places this information within a ghostly dream sequence? Discuss these questions in a brief essay.

**Chapter IV**

10. Imagine that Lucie’s father, Dr. Manette, wants to write her a letter explaining his circumstances (having spent several years in prison without being allowed to communicate with his friends or family). Because Manette is mentally and physically fragile, he has asked you to compose the letter for him. While writing, keep in mind both the state of Dr. Manette and the impression he wants to make on his daughter, who believes that he is dead.
Chapter V

11. Monsieur Defarge and his wife are similar in many ways, yet also very different. Compare and contrast these important characters by using a chart.

12. Try to predict the actions of Madame Defarge. What impact do you think she will have on the Manette family, for example, and on the French Revolution? How? Why?

13. Bearing in mind Dickens's own poverty-scarred childhood, we can understand more deeply his apparent outrage at the French peasants' consistent state of hunger (which the narrator heavily emphasizes in this chapter). Write a letter to the editor of the Paris newspaper La Gazette in which you propose a solution to this problem, a means by which starvation could be wiped out as one of the leading causes of death in France. Remember that some of your audience will be on your side but that many will be aristocrats who have no interest in sharing their wealth. Therefore, your argument must be very persuasive.

Chapter VI

14. While in prison, Manette has kept some treasured strands of hair from his wife, Lucie's dead mother. Do you have any keepsakes that belonged to a loved one? Compose an email to a friend in which you describe such a keepsake and how you got it, or a memento that you someday would like to have, and what it means to you.
Book the Second, Chapter I

15. Note the names of people and places that Dickens invents, each one usually very fitting. For example, “Manette” could be translated as “small man.” Then there’s the grave-robber named Jerry Cruncher, who lives in Hanging-sword Alley. Explain in a paragraph how his secret occupation, his name, and his address all fit together in a dark sort of way.

16. List some other names in the novel alongside an explanation as to why they are appropriate (or ironic) for the characters or places.

Chapter II

17. Charles Darnay is being tried for treason at the Old Bailey—which Dickens describes as a “hideous scene of action”—at that time the center of justice in London. What is your opinion of capital punishment? Do you think people should be executed for their crimes? Why or why not?

Chapter III

18. Write a newspaper article on Darnay’s trial, emphasizing major witnesses, what they had to say, and exactly how and why Darnay was acquitted. Assume that your audience is educated enough to understand a simply written story but that they do not know anything about the people or specific charges involved.