

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Charles Dickens

Story

This complex tale about the French Revolution, and some of its participants, opens with the famous lines:

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 winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

The novel opens on a message being sent to a British bank manager en route to France, and moves this action to a response, back to England, to one upper class Lucie, the daughter of a French physician who has spent the past eighteen years as a prisoner in the Bastille. The message is that her dad has been released from the Bastille, and that she should come to Paris, which she does at once, dying to see him again. They return to England, father and radiant young woman daughter reunited. Dr. Manette, after his ordeal in prison, had picked up the skill of shoe making, and for a long time, in depressed state, he had satisfied himself with that occupation; now, having returned to his true form, thanks to the radiance of his daughter, he returns to a significant role as a physician.

Events begin to pile up, from this point on, and we see that the idyll formed by Lucie and her rediscovered father will not remain static. The break in the idyll intrudes when Lucie appears at the trial of a French émigré in London, who has been accused of providing high secret anti-British information, about events in the British North American colonies. Lucie, whose evidence proves decisive in exonerating the accused, Darnay, finds herself wooed by both Darnay and one of the accusers of Darnay, Carton. In the end Darnay wins the hand of Lucie in marriage, and for a while lives in bliss with Dr. Manette and his daughter.

Fatally, though, Darnay has occasion to confess to Dr. Manette that he, Darnay, is in fact scion of a distinguished French noble family, the line of the infamous and brutal Marquis d'Evremond, precisely the people that were responsible for the locking up of Dr. Manette. The characters and the reader are aware that Darnay has long ago abjured his family past, which he loathes, but we are brought to realize that Darnay needs at this point, urgently, to return to France, in an effort to save the family lands and property, and his aristocratic wealth.

Darnay returns to his home village—which he finds enmeshed in the Revolutionary horror Dickens names above, at the outset of the novel—and finds himself *persona non grata*, big time, precisely the kind of returnee the Frondistes are eager to lead to the guillotine. Just such a fate looms before the arrested Darnay, who is in the end saved by the return mission of Doctor Manette, the faithful father-in-law, who races to France to speak up for the true *populiste* opinions of Darnay. The family spanning two countries, at a time of what to Englishmen and Frenchmen seemed a moment of global conflict, serves as a symbol of some peace and control in the midst of chaos.

Themes

Turmoil The chaos of the French revolution, chiefly in France, but with dreadful repercussions in England and Europe generally, is sharply contrasted to the love and active fidelity joining Lucie, her dad, and Darnay. In the light of this miniature thematic example we can appreciate the passionate lines—quoted earlier—by which Dickens opens his novel.

Depression. Dr. Manette falls deeply depressed, during his wretched imprisonment, as does his daughter when separated from him. Mr. Lorry is the only major character who manages to keep his mental balance, during the amazing events of the Revolution

Characters

Lucie is a classic Dickensian sunshine girl, faithful to her dad while he is incarcerated, privileged but populist in her attitudes, and adroit enough to testify effectively on behalf of her future husband.

Dr. Manette is a positive figure, like his daughter; hammered by 18 years in the Bastille, he has been reduced from his professional career to the skills of the cobbler, and has fallen into depression when first seen/ By the end of the tale he has resumed his professional activity, and aggressively participated in saving his son-in-law from the guillotine.

Darnay is a richly conflicted figure. Born into high aristocracy, under the *ancien régime*, he is horrified by the cynical indifference of his family line to the legitimate protests of 'le people.' His life task is to shake free of the incorrect assumptions, about him, that his aristocratic heritage has promoted.