



[A Tale of Two Cities](#), by Charles Dickens

In A Nutshell

When you watch a movie or read an article about the French Revolution, chances are it's been influenced by *A Tale of Two Cities*. Together with Thomas Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution*, Charles Dickens's novel has helped to shape generations of readers' understanding of one of the most pivotal events in modern history. Interestingly, both of these texts are fictionalized accounts of the events leading up to and following the birth of the new French Republic. Like Carlyle, Dickens put faces to the triumphs and struggles of the revolution. Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton may not have gone down in the history books, but they're stamped in our cultural memory as key figures in the French Revolution. It turns out that good fiction can be as influential as history itself.

Written in 1859, *A Tale of Two Cities* was published in weekly installments in Dickens's own journal, *All The Year Round*. It was an instant hit. Families read it by the firelight, crowds waited for the next edition to be released. Of course, the fact that Dickens was by this time one of the most prominent writers and editors in England didn't hurt its selling powers.

Because it's a bit more straight-forward plot-wise than many other Dickens novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* is also one of the most frequently-taught of Dickens's novels today. Chances are you're encountering it for the first time (or the second time, or the twenty-third time) in a classroom. That's part of why we here at Shmoop are so taken with this novel: it's an enduring testimony to the best and a searing critique of the worst of human nature. Dickens set out to

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make the French Revolution live in the hearts and minds of his readers. Take it from us, he's done a pretty good job.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 How heroic is Sydney Carton 's death?
- 2 Would the novel be different if Lucie had killed Madame Defarge? How?
- 3 Is *A Tale of Two Cities* a novel about revolution or a novel about rape?

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