Sparknotes On A Tale Of Two Cities

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A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens

Study Guide NO FEAR Translation

Summary   Characters   Main Ideas   Quotes   Further Study   Writing Help

Plot Overview

The year is 1775, and social ills plague both France and England. Jerry Cruncher, an odd-job man who works for Tellson's Bank, stops the Dover mail-coach with an urgent message for Jarvis Lorry. The message instructs Lorry to wait at Dover for a young woman, and Lorry responds with the cryptic words, "Recalled to Life." At Dover, Lorry is met by Lucie Manette, a young orphan whose father, a once-eminent doctor whom she supposed dead, has been discovered in France. Lorry escorts Lucie to Paris, where they meet Defarge, a former servant of Doctor Manette, who has kept Manette safe in a garret. Driven mad by eighteen years in the Bastille, Manette spends all of his time making shoes, a hobby he learned while in prison. Lorry assures Lucie that her love and devotion can recall her father to life, and indeed they do.

The year is now 1780. Charles Darnay stands accused of treason against the English crown. A bombastic lawyer named Stryver pleads Darnay's case, but it is not until his drunk, good-for-nothing colleague, Sydney Carton, assists him that the court acquits Darnay. Carton clinches his argument by pointing out that he himself bears an uncanny resemblance to the defendant, which undermines the prosecution's case for unmistakably identifying Darnay as the spy the authorities spotted. Lucie and Doctor Manette watched the court proceedings, and that night, Carton escorts Darnay to a tavern and asks how it feels to receive the sympathy of a woman like Lucie. Carton despises and resents Darnay because he reminds him of all that he himself has given up and might have been.

In France, the cruel Marquis Evrémonde runs down a plebian child with his carriage. Manifesting an attitude typical of the aristocracy in regard to the poor at that time, the Marquis shows no

SparkNotes on A Tale of Two Cities provide a comprehensive analysis of Charles Dickens' classic novel, which explores themes of resurrection, sacrifice, and the dichotomy between two cities—London and Paris—during the tumultuous times of the French Revolution. This article will delve into the key elements of the novel, including its characters, plot, themes, and historical context, offering a thorough understanding for readers seeking to engage with this literary masterpiece.

Overview of A Tale of Two Cities

A Tale of Two Cities, published in 1859, is set against the backdrop of the

French Revolution and follows the interconnected lives of several characters as they navigate the contrasting worlds of Paris and London. The story opens with the famous line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," encapsulating the duality present throughout the narrative. The novel is structured into three books, each highlighting different phases of the characters' lives and the societal upheaval around them.

Plot Summary

The plot primarily revolves around the lives of:

1. Charles Darnay - A French aristocrat who renounces his family name and status.
2. Sydney Carton - A dissolute English lawyer who finds redemption through love.
3. Lucie Manette - A compassionate young woman who symbolizes hope and resurrection.
4. Dr. Alexandre Manette - Lucie's father, a former prisoner of the Bastille who struggles with the trauma of his past.

The story unfolds as follows:

- Book 1: Recalled to Life
Dr. Manette is released from an eighteen-year imprisonment in the Bastille and reunited with his daughter, Lucie. Charles Darnay, who has emigrated to London, falls in love with Lucie. They marry, but their lives are soon intertwined with Sydney Carton, who harbors unrequited love for Lucie.

- Book 2: The Golden Thread
Darnay faces the consequences of his heritage when he is accused of being a spy. Lucie's unwavering support and Carton's unexpected intervention lead to Darnay's acquittal. This section explores themes of family, loyalty, and the complexities of human relationships.

- Book 3: The Track of a Storm
The revolution erupts in France, leading to Darnay's arrest as a traitor due to his aristocratic lineage. Sydney Carton, who has transformed through his love for Lucie, ultimately makes the ultimate sacrifice, taking Darnay's place at the guillotine, allowing him to return to Lucie and live a life of happiness.

Character Analysis

The characters in A Tale of Two Cities are rich and multifaceted, each representing different aspects of society during the revolutionary era.

- Sydney Carton: Carton is perhaps the most complex character. He begins as a

disillusioned and reckless lawyer but evolves into a selfless hero. His love for Lucie inspires him to seek redemption, culminating in his noble sacrifice.

- Charles Darnay: Darnay embodies the conflict between personal identity and societal expectations. He renounces his family's legacy, yet his past continually haunts him, showcasing the theme of inescapable fate.

- Lucie Manette: Lucie serves as the moral compass of the novel. Her compassion and resilience symbolize the possibility of rebirth and healing in a fractured society. She is often seen as a figure of light amidst the darkness of the revolution.

- Dr. Manette: Dr. Manette's character arc reflects the impact of trauma and the long path to recovery. His initial catatonia upon release from prison gradually gives way to a nurturing role as a father, emphasizing the importance of family.

Themes

A Tale of Two Cities is rich with themes that resonate deeply with readers. Key themes include:

1. Resurrection: The theme of resurrection is prevalent throughout the novel, illustrated through Dr. Manette's recovery from his traumatic past, Lucie's ability to bring hope to those around her, and Carton's ultimate sacrifice for love.

2. Sacrifice: The novel highlights the importance of sacrifice for the greater good. Carton's choice to give his life for Darnay epitomizes the depth of love and the willingness to put others before oneself.

3. Revolution and Social Change: The French Revolution serves as a critical backdrop, representing the struggles against oppression and the quest for justice. Dickens critiques the violence and chaos of the revolution, revealing the duality of human nature.

4. Fate and Free Will: Characters in the novel grapple with their destinies, raising questions about whether they are masters of their fate or merely victims of circumstance. Darnay's struggle with his lineage underscores this theme.

5. Love and Family: The importance of love and familial bonds is central to the narrative. The relationships between Lucie, her father, and her husband highlight the transformative power of love.

Historical Context

Understanding the historical context of A Tale of Two Cities enriches the reading experience. The novel is set during a time of significant political upheaval, specifically the French Revolution, which began in 1789. Dickens wrote the novel at a time when the repercussions of the industrial revolution and class disparity were becoming increasingly evident in Victorian England.

- French Revolution: The revolution was fueled by widespread discontent with the monarchy, economic hardship, and social inequality. Dickens highlights the chaos and brutality of the revolution, reflecting on the human cost of societal change.

- Victorian England: In contrast, Victorian England experienced its own set of challenges, including poverty and social injustice. Dickens often used his works to advocate for social reform, making A Tale of Two Cities not only a historical narrative but also a social commentary.

Key Quotes and Their Significance

A Tale of Two Cities is known for its memorable quotes that encapsulate its themes and character motivations. Some key quotes include:

- "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…"
This opening line sets the stage for the duality of the narrative, highlighting the contrasts between the two cities and the varied experiences of its characters.

- "A day will come, when the sun will shine upon the dead…"
This quote reflects the theme of resurrection and the hope for a better future amidst despair.

- "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done…"
Carton's final words before his sacrifice encapsulate the theme of redemption and the transformative power of love.

Conclusion

SparkNotes on A Tale of Two Cities serve as an invaluable resource for students and readers alike, offering insights into one of Charles Dickens' most profound works. The novel's exploration of themes such as resurrection, sacrifice, and the struggle for identity continues to resonate with contemporary audiences. Through its rich characterizations and historical context, A Tale of Two Cities remains a timeless reflection on the complexities of human nature and the perennial quest for justice and love in

an often chaotic world. As readers engage with this literary classic, they are invited to consider their own lives and the sacrifices they are willing to make for love and humanity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'A Tale of Two Cities' as summarized by SparkNotes?

The main theme of 'A Tale of Two Cities' is the struggle for resurrection and redemption, exploring the impact of the French Revolution on society and the personal sacrifices individuals make for the greater good.

How does SparkNotes describe the character development of Sydney Carton?

SparkNotes highlights Sydney Carton's transformation from a dissolute, unambitious lawyer to a heroic figure who finds purpose in love and sacrifice, culminating in his selfless act at the end of the novel.

What role does the setting play in 'A Tale of Two Cities' according to SparkNotes?

According to SparkNotes, the contrasting settings of London and Paris serve to emphasize the differences in social order and unrest, reflecting the broader themes of revolution and redemption in the narrative.

What are the key events that SparkNotes identifies as pivotal in the plot of 'A Tale of Two Cities'?

SparkNotes identifies key events such as Dr. Manette's release from the Bastille, the violence of the French Revolution, and Sydney Carton's sacrifice as pivotal moments that drive the narrative forward and illustrate the novel's themes.

How does SparkNotes interpret the significance of the novel's famous opening line?

SparkNotes interprets the opening line, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,' as a reflection of the dualities present in the story, setting the tone for the contrasts between hope and despair throughout the novel.

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Unlock the key themes and characters in "A Tale of Two Cities" with our SparkNotes guide. Learn more about this classic novel's powerful insights today!

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