

# Charles Dickens

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## Charles Dickens — A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

### Overview — the story in simple English

The novel moves between two cities: London and Paris, in the years before and during the French Revolution (ফরাসি বিপ্লব). Dr. Alexandre Manette, a French doctor, has been a prisoner in the Bastille (বাস্তিল কারাগার) for eighteen years without any trial. He is released and "recalled to life" — brought back from a living death — by his loving daughter Lucie Manette, who takes him to London with the help of Mr. Jarvis Lorry of Tellson's Bank. There Lucie marries Charles Darnay, a French nobleman (অভিজাত) who has given up his cruel family name, Evrémonde, because he hates the way his uncle's class treats the poor. Another man, Sydney Carton, a lazy but brilliant English lawyer (আইনজীবী), also loves Lucie; he looks almost exactly like Darnay, but he has wasted (নেষ্ট করা) his life and knows Lucie can never marry him. Meanwhile in Paris the hungry and oppressed (নিপীড়িত) common people, led by the wine-shop keeper Defarge and his hard, revengeful wife Madame Defarge, rise up and destroy the Bastille in 1789. The Revolution soon turns into the Reign of Terror (সন্ত্রাসের রাজত্ব): the guillotine (গিলোটিন — মাথা কাটার যন্ত্র) kills nobles and innocent people alike. Darnay returns to Paris to save an old servant, but he is arrested simply because he is an Evrémonde, and Madame Defarge — whose family was destroyed by the Evrémondes — demands his death. Even Dr. Manette's old prison letter is used as evidence against his own son-in-law. At the last moment Sydney Carton secretly changes places with Darnay in prison, using their identical faces, and dies on the guillotine in his place. His death is the supreme act of selfless love (নিঃস্বার্থ ভালোবাসা) and gives his wasted life a final, holy meaning.

 **One-line meaning: Out of hatred and revolution, Dickens shows that only love and self-sacrifice can truly "recall" a human being — or a nation — to life.**

| Quick Facts      |                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Published        | 1859 (in weekly parts in Dickens's magazine <i>All the Year Round</i> , then as a book)                                               |
| Genre            | Historical novel (ঐতিহাসিক উপন্যাস)                                                                                                   |
| Setting          | London and Paris, 1775–1793 (French Revolution period)                                                                                |
| Narration / Form | Third-person omniscient narrator; three Books — "Recalled to Life", "The Golden Thread", "The Track of a Storm"                       |
| Famous fact      | Dickens took his history of the Revolution mainly from Thomas Carlyle's <i>The French Revolution</i> (1837), a book he deeply admired |

### Themes & Technique

- 1. Resurrection (পুনরুত্থান — মৃত্যু থেকে ফিরে আসা).** This is the central theme, announced in the title of Book One, "Recalled to Life." Dr. Manette is dug out of his living grave in the Bastille; Darnay is saved from death three times; Carton, remembering the Bible verse "I am the resurrection and the life," dies so that others may live and is spiritually

reborn. Even Jerry Cruncher, the comic "Resurrection-Man" who digs up dead bodies, is a dark parody (ব্যঙ্গরূপ) of the same idea.

2. **Selfless love and sacrifice (আত্মত্যাগ).** Lucie's patient love restores her father; Carton's love for Lucie is so pure that he gives his life for her happiness. Dickens sets this personal, Christian self-sacrifice against the selfish hatred of the revolutionaries — love builds life, while hatred only multiplies death.
3. **Revolution, oppression and revenge (বিপ্লব, নিপীড়ন ও প্রতিশোধ).** Dickens shows that the Revolution was caused by the terrible cruelty of the French aristocracy — the Marquis whose carriage kills a child and who pays with a coin is the symbol of that class. But when the oppressed gain power they become oppressors themselves; the Terror simply repeats the old cruelty with new hands. This double attitude — sympathy for the people, horror at the mob — is Dickens's key political position and a favourite exam question.
4. **Fate and inevitability (নিয়তি).** From the first chapter, images of the coming storm — the Woodman (Fate) and the Farmer (Death) silently preparing the guillotine's timber and the death-carts — create a feeling that history is moving toward unavoidable bloodshed. Madame Defarge's knitting, which secretly registers the names of the doomed, turns fate into quiet handwork.
5. **Doubles and contrasts (দ্বৈততা).** The whole book is built on pairs: two cities, best of times / worst of times, Darnay / Carton (identical faces, opposite lives), Lucie / Madame Defarge (love / hate), light / darkness, life / death. This doubling is both a structural device and a moral argument.
6. **Imprisonment and the power of the past.** The Bastille, the Paris prisons, and Dr. Manette's relapses into shoemaking show how the past imprisons the mind even after the body is free. Secrets buried in the past — Manette's hidden letter, Darnay's real name — return to destroy the present.
7. **The crowd as a monster.** Dickens's mob scenes — the storming of the Bastille, the grindstone scene, the wild Carmagnole dance — present the crowd as a single creature, an ocean or a fire. They are among the most powerful crowd descriptions in English fiction.

- **Narrative technique:**
- **Third-person omniscient narrator** who often speaks directly to the reader in a prophetic, sermon-like voice.
- **Symbolism:** spilled wine = blood; the guillotine; Madame Defarge's **knitting**; the **golden thread** (Lucie); the fountain; the echoing footsteps in the Soho home.
- **Foreshadowing (আগাম ইঙ্গিত):** the broken wine-cask scene, where the poor scoop wine from the mud, predicts the blood that will later run in the same street.
- **Antithesis and repetition:** the balanced opposites of the famous opening run through the whole novel.
- **Personification:** Hunger, Fate and the guillotine (worshipped almost like a goddess) are treated as living beings.
- **Melodrama and pathos:** strong emotional contrasts, last-minute rescue, tearful scenes — typical Dickensian stagecraft.
- **Serial structure:** short chapters ending in suspense, because the novel first appeared in weekly parts.

### Key Quotations — memorize

- "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..." — the narrator, opening lines of Book One, Chapter 1. Use for: the paradox of the age, the historical setting, Dickens's antithesis.
- "Recalled to life." — the secret message carried by Mr. Jarvis Lorry; also the title of Book One. Use for: the resurrection theme.
- "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." — the Bible verse (John 11) that echoes in Sydney Carton's mind as he walks through Paris. Use for: resurrection, Carton's spiritual rebirth.

- "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." — Sydney Carton's imagined last words, the closing lines of the novel. Use for: sacrifice, selfless love, resurrection.
- "For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything." — Sydney Carton to Lucie (Book Two), the promise he finally keeps with his life. Use for: selfless love.
- "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms." — the narrator, near the end of the novel. Use for: Dickens's attitude to the Revolution — oppression breeds terror.
- "Tell Wind and Fire where to stop, but don't tell me." — Madame Defarge, refusing all mercy. Use for: revenge, the Terror, her character.
- "I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss." — from Carton's final prophetic vision at the scaffold. Use for: hope, the resurrection of France, the ending.
- The Marquis declares that repression is the only lasting philosophy, and that fear and slavery will keep the common people obedient (paraphrase — do not present as exact words in the exam). Use for: aristocratic cruelty, causes of the Revolution.

### Critics' Views (safe to cite)

| Critic                                                                   | View                                                                                                                                                | Use for                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Thomas Carlyle ( <i>The French Revolution</i> , 1837 — Dickens's source) | Saw the Revolution as a terrible but deserved judgement on a corrupt aristocracy; Dickens openly borrowed this vision and its storm-and-sea imagery | Historical novel; attitude to Revolution |
| George Orwell (essay "Charles Dickens", 1940)                            | Dickens is not a revolutionary writer; his criticism is moral, not political — he wants men to behave better, not systems to be overthrown          | Attitude to Revolution; underlying theme |
| G. K. Chesterton                                                         | Praised Dickens's deep sympathy with the common people and the poor; saw him as the great novelist of humanity                                      | Sympathy for the oppressed               |
| Edgar Johnson (Dickens's biographer, 1952)                               | Reads the novel as a warning to Victorian England: if social injustice continues, England may face its own revolution                               | Historical novel; social criticism       |
| Humphry House ( <i>The Dickens World</i> , 1941)                         | Dickens's social attitude is reformist and middle-class; he pities the poor but fears mob violence                                                  | Double attitude to the mob               |
| F. R. Leavis ( <i>The Great Tradition</i> , 1948)                        | Famously undervalued most of Dickens as mere "entertainment" — a judgement later critics strongly rejected                                          | Critical debate; balanced conclusion     |

### Exam Q&A Bank

#### Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

1. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." —  **Very likely** (the 2020 PYQ list directly asks why Dickens calls 1775 the best and the worst of times)

These are the opening words of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Charles Dickens, spoken by the omniscient narrator at the very beginning of Book One. The narrator is describing the year 1775, when the story begins in England and France. He piles up balanced opposites — wisdom and foolishness, belief and unbelief, Light and Darkness, hope and despair — to show that the age was full of extreme contradictions (চরম বৈপরীত্য): the rich enjoyed luxury and felt safe, while the poor starved and revolution silently prepared itself. The passage is significant for three reasons. First, its **antithesis** announces the novel's structure of doubles — two cities, two look-alike heroes, love against hatred. Second, it warns that the pre-Revolution age

carried both promise and disaster inside it. Third, Dickens hints that the age is "like the present period," so the warning is also aimed at his own Victorian England. It is probably the most famous opening in English fiction, and it fixes the tone of the whole novel.

**2. "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done..." — 🔥 Very likely** (Carton's sacrifice lies behind the PYQ questions on selfless love and resurrection)

These are the closing words of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens — the thoughts the narrator imagines Sydney Carton might have spoken before dying on the guillotine. Carton has secretly changed places with Charles Darnay in the Paris prison, using their identical appearance, so that Lucie's husband may live. All his life Carton was a wasted, drunken, hopeless man; now, by one supreme act of self-sacrifice (আত্মত্যাগ), he redeems (মুক্ত করা) his whole existence. The words matter because they complete the theme of **resurrection**: Carton dies physically but rises morally and spiritually, echoing the Bible verse "I am the resurrection and the life" that has followed him through Paris. The "far better rest" suggests Christian peace after a Christ-like death for others. This quotation is essential for questions on selfless love, resurrection and the character of Sydney Carton, and it gives the tragic novel its final note of hope.

## Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

**1. Short note: Tellson's Bank — ★ Likely** (asked directly in the 2020 PYQ list)

Tellson's Bank is the old, respected English bank in *A Tale of Two Cities*, standing by Temple Bar in London, with a branch in Paris. Dickens describes it with loving satire (ব্যঙ্গ): it is very small, very dark, very ugly and very inconvenient — and its partners are proud of these faults, because in their eyes whatever is old must be right. The bank thus becomes a **symbol of conservative old England**, which resists all change, just as pre-Revolution France resists reform in a far crueler way. Structurally, Tellson's is the bridge between the two cities: its confidential clerk, Mr. Jarvis Lorry, carries the message "Recalled to life," brings Dr. Manette back from Paris, and later travels to revolutionary Paris on the bank's business — the journey that pulls all the main characters into the Terror. The Paris branch becomes a shelter and meeting point during the Revolution. Jerry Cruncher, the bank's odd-job man and secret grave-robber, also connects the bank to the resurrection theme. So Tellson's is both a gentle satire on English conservatism and an essential plot-machine of the novel.

**2. Short note: The attack on the Bastille — ★ Likely** (asked directly in the 2020 PYQ list)

The storming of the Bastille (14 July 1789) is the great turning point of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The Bastille was the royal prison of Paris and the hated symbol of aristocratic tyranny (স্বৈরাচার) — Dr. Manette lay buried alive there for eighteen years. Dickens presents the attack through the poor people of Saint Antoine, led by Defarge and Madame Defarge. The crowd is painted as a "living sea," a single roaring creature of muskets, axes and fire; Madame Defarge herself takes a leading, bloody part in the killing of the prison's governor. During the attack Defarge searches Dr. Manette's old cell, One Hundred and Five, North Tower, and finds the hidden letter that will later condemn Charles Darnay — so the scene is vital to the plot as well as to the history. The episode shows Dickens's double attitude perfectly: he makes us feel the justice of the people's rage after centuries of hunger and cruelty, yet he also shows the mob as a terrifying, mindless force. The scene owes much to Carlyle's *The French Revolution*.

## Part C — Essays (15 marks)

**"Examine the theme of resurrection as depicted in 'A Tale of Two Cities'." — 🔥 Very likely (asked twice in the 2020 Part B list and again in Part C; also in the compiler's high-probability list)**

Resurrection — the return from death to life (মৃত্যু থেকে জীবনে ফিরে আসা) — is the master theme of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens announces it in the very title of Book One, "Recalled to Life," and repeats it on every level of the novel: personal, spiritual, comic and national. My thesis is that Dickens develops resurrection in three widening circles — the rescue of Dr. Manette, the repeated saving of Charles Darnay, and the spiritual rebirth of Sydney Carton — and finally extends it to France itself, so that the whole novel becomes one movement from the grave to new life.

The first and clearest resurrection is Dr. Manette's. Buried alive in the Bastille for eighteen years without trial, he has almost stopped being a man: he has forgotten his own name and knows himself only as "One Hundred and Five, North Tower," the number of his cell. Mr. Jarvis Lorry travels to Paris carrying the strange secret answer, "Recalled to life," and the recovery of the doctor is described exactly like digging a body out of a grave — Lorry even dreams again and again of digging someone out of the earth. But physical release is not enough. It is Lucie's patient love, the "golden thread" that binds the family together, which slowly restores her father's mind. Yet Dickens shows that resurrection is never complete or final: whenever the past returns, Manette relapses into his prison shoemaking, proving that the prison of memory is harder to escape than walls of stone.

The second circle of resurrection belongs to Charles Darnay, who is saved from death not once but three times: at the London treason trial, where Carton's identical face destroys the identification evidence; at his first Paris trial, where Dr. Manette's influence as an old Bastille prisoner frees him; and finally in the condemned cell, where Carton takes his place. Each escape is literally a "recall to life," and each rescue moves closer to the true centre of the theme — Sydney Carton.

Carton's resurrection is spiritual, and it is the heart of the book. He is introduced as a man already dead in life: a brilliant but drunken lawyer, the "jackal" who works so that another lawyer may shine, a man who tells Lucie he is like one who died young. His one living part is his love for Lucie, expressed in his solemn promise: "For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything." When he walks the night streets of Paris planning to die for Darnay, the Bible verse read at his father's funeral returns to him: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." By dying on the guillotine in Darnay's place, Carton turns his wasted life into a Christ-like sacrifice and rises morally from the dead. His imagined last words — "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known" — are the language of a man entering a better life, not losing one.

Dickens also gives the theme a comic and an ironic shadow. Jerry Cruncher, the "honest tradesman," is a "Resurrection-Man" who literally digs up corpses to sell to doctors — a grim parody that keeps the idea of rising from the grave always before our eyes; and his knowledge that the spy Roger Cly's coffin was a fake later strengthens Carton's plan. On the dark side stands the false resurrection of the Revolution itself, which raises the buried people of France only to make them killers in their turn; as Dickens warns, "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms."

Finally, resurrection becomes national prophecy. From the scaffold Carton foresees "a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss" — France itself recalled to life through suffering. The critics support this moral reading: George Orwell observed that Dickens's message is always moral rather than political — change the heart, not merely the system — and Edgar Johnson reads the book as a warning that only human love, never vengeance, can truly renew a society. Thus, from Manette's living grave in the Bastille to Carton's triumph on the guillotine, resurrection unifies plot, character and history, and turns a tale of terror into a gospel of hope.

**"Discuss 'A Tale of Two Cities' as a historical novel." — 🔥 Very likely (asked twice in the 2020 Part C list; also in the compiler's high-probability list, and closely linked to the question on Dickens's attitude to the French Revolution)**

A historical novel (ঐতিহাসিক উপন্যাস) places fictional characters inside real historical events, so that private lives and public history explain each other. Judged by this standard, *A Tale of Two Cities* is Dickens's most sustained historical novel: it covers the years 1775 to 1793, from the quiet corruption of the old order in France to the Reign of Terror. My thesis is that the book is a genuine historical novel in its events, atmosphere and causes, but a special, Dickensian one — history is used less for its own sake than as a moral warning and as the stage for a private drama of love and sacrifice.

First, the novel is built on real historical material. Dickens dramatises actual events: the storming of the Bastille in July 1789, the massacres in the prisons, the revolutionary tribunals, the death-carts rolling through Paris, and the guillotine, which the narrator bitterly personifies as the new goddess of France. Real institutions and conditions appear throughout — the royal warrants by which a noble could bury a man alive in prison without trial (the fate of Dr. Manette), the spy trials in England, highwaymen on the Dover road, and hanging for small crimes in London. The famous opening, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," is itself a piece of historical judgement, presenting 1775 as an age of violent contradictions on both sides

of the Channel. For this material Dickens leaned on Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, a book he read again and again; Carlyle's storm-and-sea imagery, and his idea of the Revolution as a judgement on a guilty aristocracy, shape the whole novel.

Second, Dickens excels at the historical novelist's central task: showing causes. Book Two paints the old regime so vividly that the Revolution feels inevitable. The great lord needs four servants to serve his chocolate while the poor district of Saint Antoine starves; the Marquis's carriage crushes a child in the street and he tosses a coin to the weeping father; the broken wine-cask scene, where the hungry scoop spilt wine from the mud, foreshadows the blood that will soon run on the same stones. When the narrator later declares, "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms," Dickens states the historical law of the book: oppression manufactures its own avengers. This gives the novel its famously balanced attitude — deep sympathy with the starving people, real horror at the mob they become. As the biographer Edgar Johnson argues, the French story is at the same time a warning to Victorian England: reform, or face the same storm. Humphry House similarly notes that Dickens pities the poor yet fears mob violence — both feelings are in the book.

Third, the fictional plot is skilfully woven into public history. Dr. Manette's Bastille imprisonment, Darnay's arrest simply for being an emigrant Evrémonde, the reading of Manette's hidden prison letter before the Tribunal, and Carton's death on the guillotine are private events that could only happen inside these public ones. Madame Defarge, knitting the names of the doomed into her secret register, is fiction, yet she embodies the real spirit of the Terror; her chilling words — "Tell Wind and Fire where to stop, but don't tell me" — show revenge grown beyond all human control.

At the same time, the novel has limits as pure history. Dickens is not writing a documentary: the time-scheme is compressed, no real revolutionary leader appears as a character, and the causes of the Revolution are simplified into moral terms of cruelty and revenge rather than politics and economics. George Orwell rightly observes that Dickens is no revolutionary; his criticism is moral — he wants changed hearts more than changed systems. The final centre of interest is not the Revolution but the private drama of resurrection and selfless love, crowned by Carton's "far, far better thing." G. K. Chesterton's Dickens — the great lover of common humanity — is visible here too: the crowd scenes pity the people even while fearing them.

In conclusion, *A Tale of Two Cities* satisfies every essential demand of the historical novel — real events, authentic atmosphere, convincing causes, and fictional lives entangled with public history — while remaining unmistakably Dickensian: history seen through symbol, melodrama and moral prophecy. It is best described as a historical novel with a purpose: the past is "recalled to life" in order to warn the present.

## ⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

| Item                | Content                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Story in 3 lines    | Dr. Manette is freed after 18 years in the Bastille and restored by his daughter Lucie's love. Lucie marries Darnay, a French noble who rejected his cruel family; the Revolution condemns him in Paris. Sydney Carton, who loves Lucie hopelessly, swaps places with Darnay and dies on the guillotine. |
| 2 must-quotes       | "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." / "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done..."                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 2 backup quotes     | "I am the resurrection and the life..." / "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms."                                                                                                                                         |
| 2 critics           | Orwell: Dickens's criticism is moral, not political. Edgar Johnson: the novel warns England to reform or face its own revolution.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Technique words     | antithesis, symbolism, foreshadowing, personification, omniscient narrator, melodrama, doubles                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Top 3 likely essays | 1. Theme of resurrection 🔥 2. A Tale of Two Cities as a historical novel 🔥 3. Dickens's attitude to the French Revolution / how Dickens glorifies selfless love ★                                                                                                                                        |

*Exam-timing tip: In the 4-hour exam give each 15-mark essay about 40–45 minutes — 5 minutes plan, 35 minutes writing (intro with thesis, 4–5 body paragraphs, at least 2 quotations and 1 critic), 5 minutes checking — and never let one answer eat another answer's time.*