

Changing impressions: a sydney carton character analysis

[People](#), [Charles Dickens](#)



They say a first impression is everything. However, I've found that these aren't reliable. Some people cover their true feelings, trying to be tough. You never know what's going on in people's lives when you first meet them that causes them to act differently. And sometimes, we just make inaccurate assumptions. This is also true of things in literature. In Charles Dickens's novel "A Tale of Two Cities," and in all his novels, he wants to confuse people to keep them reading. He creates complex characters who change over time, or rather just gives us more information influence our decisions our opinions. One of these complex characters who Dickens brings out in different light later is Sydney Carton. In the beginning of the story, when he is first introduced to us at Charles Darnays' trial, we only see his outward actions, and none of his feelings. All we see of the man is that he appears to be a sloppy drunk, and quite the good-for-nothing loser. He spends the entire period during the trial staring at the ceiling with his eyes glazed over, never speaking once because he's too drunk to do so. We later see that him after the trial, at a restaurant with Darnay. He does nothing other than drink. He orders glass after glass of wine, getting as drunk as possible. One wonders if he ever does anything else. He is rather mean to Darnay after the man thanks him profusely, and continues to drink. We see that not only is he a drunk, he's a mean drunk. And then after Darnay leaves, Carton covers his head, lays down on the table, and tells the waitress to wake him at ten P. M. as he passes out. It almost implies he has nowhere else to go, but mostly just tells a reader that he has nothing better to do. We also see him at his law partner Stryver's house, working late night hours as he drinks still more. It would seem that Stryver pulls Carton's dead weight around to help him for

some reason, and a reader wonder why Stryver does this. Stryver speaks of ambition and drive, and we can clearly see by comparison that Sydney has none. IT seems has no will to live, but rather stays alive only for his next drink. We later see him wondering around town like a vagrant, stumbling back to his house in the early morning hours. We arrives there, Dickens poetically that he cries himself to sleep. This is where one's opinion of him first begins to change. It makes him more real, but we still wonder if he is crying solely because he's drunk and out of it, or over something real. A reader's opinion of Sydney may slowly change while they read the novel, and I know mine did. We see that Sydney has had some things in his past life that make it difficult for him today, although we don't know what they are. And we see that he loves Lucie as he visits regularly and his actions towards her show his endearment for her. The biggest event in the book that would change one's mind on Sydney's character is his profession of love for Lucie. He has no hope that it will change Lucie's earlier agreement to Charles Darnay's proposal, but he feels that she needs to know how he feels about her. When he pledges that he will give his life to save anyone close to Lucie, the reader sees his true colors. He really is dedicated to her, and though he would give anything to have her, he's willing to step back and simply allow her to know how he feels instead of fighting for her. Some would argue this is because he knows he has no chance, but I would say he does this for her as well, because he doesn't want to make her uncomfortable in any way after she knows. Later in the story, Sydney proves his dedication by coming around to help out things, play with the kids, and just in general be a part of the family. He stays out of Charles and Lucie's way though, and this is where

I find my proof that he was truthful about what he said before. Some would argue that Carton is only an emotional drunk who doesn't care to do anything for anyone or even desire to live a second longer. The fact of the matter is, though, Sydney Carton dies on the guillotine to spare Charles Darnay. However you may choose to interpret Carton's sacrifice- positively or negatively- will affect your judgment of his character, and of Dickens' entire work. Some readers take the positive view that Carton's act is a triumph of individual love over the mob hatred of the Revolution. Carton and the seamstress he comforts meet their deaths with great dignity. In fulfilling his old promise to Lucie, Carton attains peace; those watching see " the peacefulest man's face ever beheld" at the guillotine. In a prophetic vision, the former " jackal" glimpses a better world rising out of the ashes of revolution, and long life for Lucie and her family- made possible by his sacrifice. This argument also links Carton's death with Christian sacrifice and love. When Carton makes his decision to die, the New Testament verse beginning " I am the Resurrection and the Life" nearly becomes his theme song. The words are repeated a last time at the moment Carton dies. In what sense may we see Carton's dying in Darnay's place as Christ-like? It wipes away his sin, just as Christ's death washed clean man's accumulated sins. For readers who choose the negative view, Carton's death seems an act of giving up. These readers point out that Stryver's jackal has little to lose. Never useful or happy, Carton has already succumbed to the depression eating away at him. In the midst of a promising youth, Carton had " followed his father to the grave"- that is, he's already dead in spirit. For such a man, physical death would seem no sacrifice, but a welcome relief. Some readers

even go so far as to claim that Carton's happy vision of the future at the novel's close is out of place with his overall gloominess. According to this interpretation, the bright prophecies of better times ahead are basically Dickens' way of copping out, of pleasing his audience with a hopeful ending. If Sydney Carton's motives seem complicated to you, try stepping back and viewing him as a man, rather than an influence on the story. He's a complex, realistic character. We see him so clearly, working early morning hours on Stryver's business, padding between table and punch bowl in his headdress of sopping towels, that we're able to feel for him. Have you ever known someone who's thrown away his talent or potential, yet retains a spark of achievement, as well as people's sympathy? That's one way of looking at Sydney Carton. However you view him, though, is how Dickens meant it. He meant for his stories to be controversial and confusing; he loved it when his characters were complex and hard to understand. He felt he himself was this way, and made his characters modeled after him. But I know that after reading this book, I will check my first impressions and not really form too much of one before I see what's really going on. And the next time I meet someone, I'll remember that first impressions aren't everything.