

Mirror images: sydney carton and charles darnay



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In his masterpiece, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens strengthens his theme of paired opposites by juxtaposing the characters of Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay. Initially, it seems as though Carton and Darnay are completely bipolar. While Darnay exhibits nothing but poise and manners, Carton is crude and unmotivated. However, as the novel progresses, Sydney Carton proves to be a far more complex character than he once seemed. He begins to reveal a multifaceted personality—one of underlying nobility, of selflessness, and of course, unconditional love for Lucie Manette. Eventually, Sydney transforms into the calm, knowing man that Darnay once was, and Darnay degenerates into a useless, stupefied character. The similarities and differences between Darnay and Carton, including the absolute reversal of their roles, can be explained through a chronological analysis of *A Tale of Two Cities*. When Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay first meet in the beginning of Book Two, they are complete opposites. At Darnay's trial, Sydney has the look of an inept, disheveled attorney, staring indifferently at the ceiling to pass the time (Dickens 75). However, it is not long before he shows his true intelligence, after he shrewdly saves the day by pointing out Darnay's physical resemblance to his own (81). Immediately after the trial, Sydney relapses into his previous state of idleness, leaving one to doubt if he possesses any likeness to the dignified, poised Darnay outside of physical similarities! He is particularly rude to Darnay while the two are dining, and Darnay even comments, "I begin to think we are not much alike in any particular, you and I" (90). Throughout the night, Carton is "not quite sober" (89), and he makes a fool out of himself while Darnay maintains a calm disposition. Although Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay are mirror images of each other, Darnay has shown that he is, in fact, a perfect reflection of

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what Carton might have been. Carton knows this, and he bitterly compares his wasted life to Darnay's perfect world: "A good reason for taking to a man, that he shows you what you have fallen away from, and what you might have been! ...You hate the fellow" (91). Now that he has strayed from what he could have been, Carton knows that he can never win Lucie. For this, Darnay is a constant source of frustration to Carton, reminding him of the life he has lost. In the following chapters of Book Two, several new facets of Sydney Carton's character are revealed, and he begins to resemble Charles Darnay slightly more. Carton reveals that he has been a "jackal" for his entire life, living and working for people like Stryver. "Even then [at old Shrewsbury School], I did exercises for other boys, and seldom did my own" (95). Although Carton is perfectly capable and intelligent, he no longer has the confidence to pursue a success of his own. He had become "incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigned to let it eat him away" (97). Sydney knows that he is in no position to court Lucie, but nevertheless he decides to express his adoration for her. He is similar to Charles Darnay in that they share an honest, absolute love for Lucie Manette. Both Carton and Darnay are sincere, compassionate fellows (unlike Stryver, who only wishes to have Lucie as a "trophy wife"). However, Sydney is different from Darnay in that he does not wish for Lucie's hand in marriage. Instead, his only wish is to make her happy, whatever the sacrifice, even if he should get nothing in return! "For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything...think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you!" (156). Here, Sydney reveals himself as a fellow of great delicacy—more so than Darnay. However, that is not to say that Darnay does not possess his own delicacy. He nobly

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acknowledges how his family had wronged the poor, and thus renounces his aristocratic lifestyle. Furthermore, he reveals his respectful nature when he tells Doctor Manette of his love for Lucie rather than telling Lucie directly. “ Doctor Manette... I look only to... being faithful to you to the death. Not to divide with Lucie her privilege as your child... but to come of aid of it, and bind her closer to you” (164). Doctor Manette approves of Darnay’s proposal, and Darnay marries Lucie shortly after. After the wedding of Charles Darnay and Lucie Manette, an interesting shift occurs between Darnay and Carton. When Darnay and Lucie return from their honeymoon, Carton is the first person to pay the newlyweds a visit. In a very earnest and compassionate apology, Carton implores Darnay to “ forget about” past mishaps, in hopes that they “ might be friends” (236). During this conversation, Sydney constantly criticizes himself: “ At any rate you know me as a dissolute dog who has never done any good, and never will” (237). To this, Darnay uncaringly replies, “ I don’t know that you ‘ never will” (237). It is clear that Sydney Carton is willing to do anything to be friends with Lucie and Darnay. However, Darnay indicates the opposing side of the “ mirror” through his dismissive attitude toward Sydney. Immediately after Sydney leaves, Darnay refers to the poor fellow as “ a problem of carelessness and recklessness” (237)! When one compares Darnay’s flippant stance to Carton’s sincere intentions, one cannot help but notice that the tables have been turned. Dickens has flipped the “ mirror images” of Darnay and Carton—for once, Carton is completely serious and polite, while Darnay is uncaring. Darnay and Carton’s roles change progressively throughout Book Three; by the end, their roles have reversed completely. After Charles Darnay receives a pitiful letter from his old servant, Gabelle, he immediately resolves to return to

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Paris in order to save his loyal friend. His noble, selfless response in the face of great danger is admirable; however, he is naive in thinking that he can reason with the senseless mobs. Darnay quickly proves to be inept in accomplishing much of anything, and requires the aid/influence of Doctor Manette after he has been thrown in jail. While Doctor Manette is powerful enough to sway a fickle mob at Darnay's tribunal, he is unable to save Darnay a second time, from the clutches of La Force. In turn, Darnay becomes a weak and useless character, incapable of accomplishing what he came to do. Later, when Sydney Carton joins the Manette/Darnay family in France, he proves to be far more successful. Carton and Darnay have very similar reasons for coming to France—they both wish to aid the people they care for. (Carton comes to help Lucie, and Darnay initially comes to save Gabelle). However, the “mirrors” have flipped entirely. Carton is no longer a man without a purpose; he has resolved to give his life for the woman he loves. As he carries forth his plan, Carton reveals his strong sense of calmness, confidence, and level-headedness. He uses his expertise to defeat Barsad's “deck of cards” (thus gaining entrance into Darnay's cell) and visits the apothecary to purchase necessary materials, all before he even heads to the trial. Finally, before he faces the guillotine, he bids farewell to Lucie for the last time, reaffirming his oath to make any sacrifice for her when he says, “A life you love” (365). When Carton finally executes his plan, he is the poised, calm man that Darnay once was. Darnay, after spending over one year in a prison cell, has sunk into a useless stupor. The reversal is complete, and Sydney Carton faces the guillotine nobly, knowing that he, too, will be resurrected (Busch xv). Before he chose a title for *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens considered a great many alternate titles, including “Buried

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Alive,” and “ Memory Carton” (Woodcock 14). However, the final title is the only one that adequately describes the true spirit and theme of the book. The phrase “ a tale of two cities” contains endless connotations—most prominently, the paired opposites known as Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay. These two characters are very interesting reflections of each other; they are doubles, strikingly similar in appearance, tied together by fate (Woodcock 24). Yet, they are two completely separate entities. Next to Lucie, Darnay is the most unconvincing character in the entire novel. He is impossibly polite, optimistic, and kind, whereas Carton is a bitter and realistic representation of the “ dark side of the mirror.” Ultimately, Sydney Carton is the one who saves the day, thereby completing the task that Charles Darnay had tried to accomplish. Although Darnay is the perfect gentleman, the “ less perfect” Sydney Carton ironically proves to be the hero.

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