

# A tale of two cities – a historical fiction essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A Tale of Two Cities is a novel categorized as historical fiction. Historical fiction is a composite material, with a portion of history embedded in a matrix of fiction. A Tale of Two Cities is appropriately titled, as the novel is the story of England and Revolutionary France; as a result it can be categorized as historical fiction. A Tale of Two Cities is parallel to history in many different respects.

The English setting, and atmosphere, is similarly portrayed, as it actually existed in the seventeenth century. In the novel, Dickens goes into more detail about Revolutionary France in history with regards to setting, politics and the social structure, as well as the events, which occurred during the revolution. Dickens may not have been totally accurate with his historical information, but he vividly portrays the atmosphere of England and France during this period. The French Revolution, by Carlyle, was the main source of Dickens' information for his novel with the two settings, London and Paris.

Adopting Carlyle's philosophy of history, Dickens created A Tale of Two Cities with a tightly structured plot, developed through a series of amazingly detailed and vivid pictures. The English setting of A Tale of Two Cities is very realistic with respect to the time period. Dickens starts the story by describing the atmosphere in England by illustrating the poverty and the economic situation. It is a tale, which tells of life in two cities and the dreadful happenings, which link them together (Osbourn 3). It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, was the epoc of belief, it was the epoc of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing

before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only” (Dickens 35).

In England it was the dawn of the industrial revolution, and for the growing middle class it was the best of times. For the poor, it was the worst of times because illiteracy and unemployment were high. In France, for the aristocracy it seemed like the best of times but many lived in a world insulated from what the reality was for the poor: hunger, and unemployment. Whether it was the best of times or the worst of times depended on one’s point of view. The quote describes the spirit of the era in which this story takes place. Dickens also shows that crime ran rampant and robbery and murder were common occurrences in England at the time. Daring burglaries by armed men, and highway robberies, took place in the capital itself every night” (Dickens 36). This shows the terror that the highwaymen brought to the people in England.

The Old Bailey, a court of law, which stands beside the famous Newgate Prison, is the place where Charles Darnay was tried for treason. The Old Bailey was a real court in London. Prisoners were kept in the gaol, brought next door for trial, and hung on the street outside, until 1866 (Dickens 406). “ ‘ You know the Old Bailey well, no doubt? ’ said one of the oldest of the clerks to Jerry the messenger” (Dickens 89). The Old Bailey was a court of law until it was renovated and called the Central Criminal Court. The Tellson’s Bank, where Mr.

Lorry works is based on a real life bank called Thelusson's Bank. "Tellson's Bank by temple bar was an old fashioned place even in the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty" (Dickens 83). Dickens needed a name for the organization, which brings Lucie and Dr. Manette from France to England; he had read about Thelusson's Bank in Carlyle's work and shifted the name to Tellson's Bank, which had branches in London and Paris (Davis, *The Flint* 248). The setting in England is realistic for the time and is historically correct.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, practically all of the French peasants lived in poverty. Dickens sets the atmosphere of a grim world of the very poor and the conditions of Frances's streets as they were at the time. This is exemplified in the wine scene, in which the casket falls and smashes on the ground and everyone suspends his business and rushed to drink the wine. "All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine.

The rough, irregular stones of the street, pointing everyway, and designed, one might have thought, expressively to lame all living creatures that approached them had damned it into little pools; these were surrounded, each by its own jostling group or crowd, according to its size...There was no drainage to carry off the wine, and not only did it all get taken up, but so much mud got taken up along with it..." (Dickens 59 ; 60). By writing about this situation, Dickens illustrates the type of life that the French peasants lived. In France before the revolution the social structure had two extremes. The peasants hated the aristocrats for their power and money and this is shown in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

This is revealed by a man in a crowd who yells to Monseigneur, “ I devote you, to the Devil! ” (Dickens 140). In other words, the aristocrats had “ sealed their graves” because they were too cruel towards the lower classes. (Orwell, Charles Dickens 1). The lower classes did not have any civil liberties and were not allowed to participate in government. The only historical characters in England in A Tale of Two Cities are King George III and Charlotte Sophia.

Dickens describes King George III who is the King of England and Charlotte Sophia: “ There was a King with a large jaw and a Queen with a plain face on the thrown of England” (Dickens 35). Later Miss Pross says, “ The short and the long is that I am subject of his Most Gracious Majesty King George the third” (Dickens 318). Given that these characters are included in the book it can be described as historical fiction.

There are many events in France that makes A Tale of Two Cities historical fiction. In history as in A Tale of Two Cities King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette are beheaded at the guillotine eight months apart. King Louis XVI was executed on January 21 1793 and his wife Marie Antoinette was executed on October 16 1793. “ Now, breaking the unnatural silence the whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king, and now, in it seemed almost in the same breath, the head of his fair wife which had had eight weary months of imprisoned widowhood and misery to turn it gray”(Dickens 302).

Another historical fact that is included in the book is the storming of the Bastille. “ ‘ Come, then! ’ cried Defarge, ... ‘ Patriots and friends, we are

ready! The Bastille! ' " (Dickens 245). The Bastille was captured by a huge group of Parisians that rushed it, and then began to tear it down (The Impact of the Revolution 3). This started the Reign of terror where anyone who was deemed an enemy of the revolution was thrown in jail and eventually killed. " ' He is a traitor since the decree. His life is forfeit to the people.

His cursed life is not his own. ' " (Dickens 278). Anyone who openly disagreed with the new government or was supporters of the King were declared rebels and was sent to jail (The Impact of the Revolution 3). Since there are aspects of revolutionary France integrated into A Tale of Two Cities, its considered historical fiction.

Tuileries is the palace where the monarchy lived France. " From the Palace of the Tuileries, through Monseigneur and the whole Court..." (Dickens 138). The home of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette was The Palace of the Tuileries. It was the object of hatred to successive generations of French revolutionaries, and was eventually burnt down during the last days of the Commune in 1871 (Woodcock 407).

The Bastille, a prison, appears in A Tale of Two Cities; this is also true in history. The Bastille was used as a state prison earlier in time. It was also used to watch over the city of Paris. (Glossary Provided). Dickens also makes clear of the type of judicial system, which they had in France. If one was found guilty on an offense such as treason or murder they were hanged or were beheaded by the Guillotine. " The ridges thrown to the side and to that, now crumble in and close behind the last plough as it passes on, for all are following to the Guillotine" (Dickens 404).

Some of the characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* are based on people that were a part of the revolution. Defarge who owned the wine shop was based on the person called Lafarge. Carlyle casually referred to Lafarge, the head of the Jacobin Society, in his book: *The French Revolution: A History* (Davis 247).

At Carton's execution there were a number of women knitting, this is also what happened at the executions during the revolution. "In front of it, seated in chairs, as in a garden of public diversion, are a number of women, busily knitting" (Dickens 401). Jacobin women were well known at the guillotine, they would knit while observing the executions. (Davis 247). *A Tale of Two Cities* is well portrayed by Dickens as historical fiction. He does this by including places in France and England that are well known.

In many ways England and France are different but they are similar in their terror and their troubles, this casts them in a parallel light (Osbourne 3). Dickens also takes historical events, like the storming of the Bastille, and makes them parts his story. Dickens' objective in writing *A Tale of Two Cities* was to educate about a past event, the French Revolution. Dickens wrote the story in order to warn his Victorian inhabitants of what may happen if England did not make the necessary economic, judicial and political reforms. He warned them that if they did not change their ways, a revolution might occur, like it did in France.

Since aspects of setting and events are accurate in history, *A Tale of Two Cities* can therefore be described as historical fiction.

Bibliography Dickens, Charles and George Woodcock. *A Tale of Two Cities*.  
England, 1859. Davis, Earle. *The Flint and the Flame: The Artistry of Charles  
Dickens*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963.

(pages 247-248)

Osborn, Barbara. *Critical Commentary on A Tale of Two Cities*. University of  
London Press, 1957 Orwell, George. *Charles Dickens*. Running Press, 1986,  
1992. WWW Sites (World Wide Web) “ Victorian Images of the French  
Revolution” METU British Novelists Seminar in Ankara, Turkey.

March 1998. [http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/dickens/turkey/turlit12.](http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/dickens/turkey/turlit12.html#d)

<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Dickens.html> “ The Dickens Page.” Nagoya University. September 1995.

<http://www.novelguides.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/taleoftwocities/>  
“ Classic Notes on  
Tale of Two Cities.” 1999-2000.