Recalled to life

In A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens asserts his belief in the constant possibility of resurrection and transformation, both on a personal level and on a societal level. The narrative suggests that Sydney Carton's death secures a new, peaceful life for Lucie Manette, Charles Darnay, and even Carton himself. By delivering himself to the guillotine, Carton ascends to the plane of heroism, becoming a Christ-like figure whose death serves to save the lives of others. His own life thus gains meaning and value. Moreover, the final pages of the novel suggest that, like Christ, Carton will be resurrected-Carton is reborn in the hearts of those he has died to save. Similarly, the text implies that the death of the old regime in France prepares the way for the beautiful and renewed Paris that Carton supposedly envisions from the guillotine. Although Carton spends most of the novel in a life of indolence and apathy, the supreme selflessness of his final act speaks to a human capacity for change. Although the novel dedicates much time to describing the atrocities committed both by the aristocracy and by the outraged peasants, it ultimately expresses the belief that this violence will give way to a new and better society. Dickens elaborates his theme with the character of Doctor Manette. Early on in the novel, Lorry holds an imaginary conversation with him in which he says that Manette has been " recalled to life." As this statement implies, the doctor's eighteen-year imprisonment has constituted a death of sorts. Lucie's love enables Manette's spiritual renewal, and her maternal cradling of him on her breast reinforces this notion of rebirth. Doctor Manette's own death and resurrection could be a symbol for France's own death in terms of humanitarianism. And just as Lucie plans to nurse her father back to health and sanity with love and compassion, Dickens suggests that France can construct a new and more compassionate society through

dedication and valor- not the haphazard violence of the revolutionaries. Connected to the theme of the possibility of resurrection is the notion that sacrifice is necessary to achieve happiness. Dickens examines this second theme, again, on both a national and personal level. For example, the revolutionaries prove that a new, egalitarian French republic can come about only with a heavy and terrible cost-personal loves and loyalties must be sacrificed for the good of the nation. Also, when Darnay is arrested for the second time the guard who seizes him reminds Manette of the primacy of state interests over personal loyalties; that “ if the Republic demands certain sacrifices from you, without doubt you as a good patriot will be happy to make them. The Republic goes before all. The People is supreme”. Moreover, Madame Defarge gives her husband a similar lesson when she chastises him for his devotion to Manette-an emotion that, in her opinion, only clouds his obligation to the revolutionary cause. Most important, Carton’s transformation into a man of moral worth depends upon his sacrificing of his former self. In choosing to die for his friends, Carton not only enables their happiness but also ensures his own spiritual rebirth. Almost all of the characters in A Tale of Two Cities fight against some form of imprisonment. For Darnay and Manette, this struggle is quite literal. Both serve significant sentences in French jails. Still, as the novel demonstrates, the memories of what one has experienced prove no less confining than the walls of prison. Manette, for example, finds himself trapped, at times, by the recollection of life in the Bastille and can do nothing but revert, trembling, to his pathetic shoemaking compulsion. Similarly, Carton spends much of the novel struggling against the confines of his own personality, dissatisfied with a life that he regards as worthless. The fact that he can only find meaning in his

life by sacrificing it for others is another symbol for the good of the whole over the good of one. Sydney Carton’s love for Lucie caused a resurrection of “ whispers of old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent forever.” He seemed to have died in spirit when he “ followed his father to the grave”. He is resurrected from a useless existence to a useful and purposeful life when he sets out to save Darnay. As he walks the streets of Paris, he repeats the words “ I am the resurrection and the life…”. He dies but lives on in the memories of those for whom he gives his life. He also lives on in the life of Lucie’s son, who is named for him and “ resurrects” his career, winning his way up so well that Carton’s name “ becomes illustrious by the light of his.” Carton’s story is kept alive for generations when Lucie’s son tells his own son. On a literal level, Madame Defarge’s knitting constitutes a whole network of symbols. Into her needlework she stitches a registry of all those condemned to die in the name of a new republic. But on a metaphoric level, the knitting constitutes a symbol in itself, representing the stealthy, cold-blooded vengefulness of the revolutionaries. As Madame Defarge sits quietly knitting, she appears harmless and quaint. In fact, however, she sentences her victims to death. Similarly, the French peasants may appear simple and humble figures, but they eventually rise up to massacre their oppressors. Dickens’s knitting imagery also emphasizes an association between vengefulness and fate, which, in Greek mythology, is traditionally linked to knitting or weaving. The Fates, three sisters who control human life, busy themselves with the tasks of weavers or seamstresses: one sister spins the web of life, another measures it, and the last cuts it. Similarly Philomela wove her violent story into a tapestry to warn her sister and implicate her husband. Madame Defarge’s knitting thus

becomes a symbol of her victims' fate-death at the hands of a wrathful peasantry. The Marquis Evrémonde is less a believable character than an archetype of an evil and corrupt social order. He is not only overly self-indulgent, as evidenced by the train of attendants who help him to drink his chocolate; he is also completely indifferent to the lives of the peasants whom he exploits, as evidenced by his lack of sympathy for the father of the child whom his carriage tramples to death. As such, the Marquis stands as a symbol of the ruthless aristocratic cruelty that the French Revolution seeks to overcome. In order to convey the significance of revolution and resurrection in the novel, Dickens adeptly portrays the horrors of mob violence throughout the novel, leaving the reader with images of waves of people crashing through the battered gates of the Bastille; of Foulon with his mouth stuffed full of grass as he is beaten to death and beheaded; of the hundreds of unruly citizens singing and dancing wildly around Lucie Manette as she stands alone outside her husband's prison. However, Dickens balances these visions of revolutionary terror with images of rebirth and hope, such as Lucie's golden hair mingling with her father's prematurely white hair in the moments after he first remembers her mother and Carton's prophetic vision of the future as he goes to the guillotine. Although A Tale of Two Cities lacks the wealth of memorable characters found in other Dickens novels, the unforgettable images Dickens creates compensate for this deficiency.