

A tale of two cities quotes and explanation

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



A Tale of Two Cities quotes & explanation 1. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch 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. . . .

Explanation for Quotation 1 >> These famous lines, which open A Tale of Two Cities, hint at the novel's central tension between love and family, on the one hand, and oppression and hatred, on the other. The passage makes marked use of anaphora, the repetition of a phrase at the beginning of consecutive clauses—for example, "it was the age . . . it was the age" and "it was the epoch . . . it was the epoch. . . ." This technique, along with the passage's steady rhythm, suggests that good and evil, wisdom and folly, and light and darkness stand equally matched in their struggle. The opposing pairs in this passage also initiate one of the novel's most prominent motifs and structural figures—that of doubles, including London and Paris, Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay, Miss Pross and Madame Defarge, and Lucie and Madame Defarge. 2. A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. Explanation for Quotation 2 >> The narrator makes

this reflection at the beginning of Book the First, Chapter 3, after Jerry Cruncher delivers a cryptic message to Jarvis Lorry in the darkened mail coach. Lorry's mission—to recover the long-imprisoned Doctor Manette and “recall” him to life—establishes the essential dilemma that he and other characters face: namely, that human beings constitute perpetual mysteries to one another and always remain somewhat locked away, never fully reachable by outside minds. This fundamental inscrutability proves most evident in the case of Manette, whose private sufferings force him to relapse throughout the novel into bouts of cobbling, an occupation that he first took up in prison. Throughout the novel, Manette mentally returns to his prison, bound more by his own recollections than by any attempt of the other characters to “recall” him into the present. This passage's reference to death also evokes the deep secret revealed in Carton's self-sacrifice at the end of the novel. The exact profundity of his love and devotion for Lucie remains obscure until he commits to dying for her; the selflessness of his death leaves the reader to wonder at the ways in which he might have manifested this great love in life. 3. The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a night-cap than in

it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees-blood.

Explanation for Quotation 3 >> This passage, taken from Book the First, Chapter 5, describes the scramble after a wine cask breaks outside Defarge's wine shop. This episode opens the novel's examination of Paris and acts as a potent depiction of the peasants' hunger. These oppressed individuals are not only physically starved—and thus willing to slurp wine from the city streets—but are also hungry for a new world order, for justice and freedom from misery. In this passage, Dickens foreshadows the lengths to which the peasants' desperation will take them. This scene is echoed later in the novel when the revolutionaries—now similarly smeared with red, but the red of blood—gather around the grindstone to sharpen their weapons. The emphasis here on the idea of staining, as well as the scrawling of the word blood, furthers this connection, as does the appearance of the wood-sawyer, who later scares Lucie with his mock guillotine in Book the Third, Chapter 5. Additionally, the image of the wine lapping against naked feet anticipates the final showdown between Miss Pross and Madame Defarge in Book the Third, Chapter 14: "The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stern ways, and through much staining of blood, those feet had come to meet that water." 4. Along the Paris streets, the death-carts rumble, hollow and harsh. Six tumbrils carry the day's wine to La Guillotine. All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in one realization, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced

this horror. Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind. Explanation for Quotation 4 >> In this concise and beautiful passage, which occurs in the final chapter of the novel, Dickens summarizes his ambivalent attitude toward the French Revolution. The author stops decidedly short of justifying the violence that the peasants use to overturn the social order, personifying "La Guillotine" as a sort of drunken lord who consumes human lives—"the day's wine." Nevertheless, Dickens shows a thorough understanding of how such violence and bloodlust can come about. The cruel aristocracy's oppression of the poor "sow[s] the same seed of rapacious license" in the poor and compels them to persecute the aristocracy and other enemies of the revolution with equal brutality. Dickens perceives these revolutionaries as "[c]rush[ed] . . . out of shape" and having been "hammer[ed] . . . into . . . tortured forms." These depictions evidence his belief that the lower classes' fundamental goodness has been perverted by the terrible conditions under which the aristocracy has forced them to live. 5. I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out. . . . I see that child who lay upon her bosom and who bore my name, a man winning his way up in that path of life which once was mine. I see him winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the light of his. . . . It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have

ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known.

Explanation for Quotation 5 >> Though much debate has arisen regarding the value and meaning of Sydney Carton's sacrifice at the end of the novel, the surest key to interpretation rests in the thoughts contained in this passage, which the narrator attributes to Carton as he awaits his sacrificial death. This passage, which occurs in the final chapter, prophesies two resurrections: one personal, the other national. In a novel that seeks to examine the nature of revolution—the overturning of one way of life for another—the struggles of France and of Sydney Carton mirror each other. Here, Dickens articulates the outcome of those struggles: just as Paris will “ris[e] from [the] abyss” of the French Revolution’s chaotic and bloody violence, so too will Carton be reborn into glory after a virtually wasted life. In the prophecy that Paris will become “a beautiful city” and that Carton’s name will be “made illustrious,” the reader sees evidence of Dickens’s faith in the essential goodness of humankind. The very last thoughts attributed to Carton, in their poetic use of repetition, register this faith as a calm and soothing certainty.