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**A Tale of  
Two Cities**

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# CliffsNotes™ on Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities

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## A Tale of Two Cities

By Marie Kalil

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- Explore themes, character development, and recurring images in the Critical Commentaries
- Examine in-depth Character Analyses
- Acquire an understanding of the novel with Critical Essays
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# How to Use This Book

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This CliffsNotes study guide on Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *A Tale of Two Cities*. This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *A Tale of Two Cities*. Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Charles Dickens and *A Tale of Two Cities*, check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

CliffsNotes provides the following icons to highlight essential elements of particular interest:



Reveals the underlying themes in the work.



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Uncovers elements such as setting, atmosphere, mystery, passion, violence, irony, symbolism, tragedy, foreshadowing, and satire.



Enables you to appreciate the nuances of words and phrases.

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The sections that follow provide great tools for supplementing your reading of *A Tale of Two Cities*. First, in order to enhance your understanding of and enjoyment from reading, we provide quick summaries in case you have difficulty when you read the original literary work. Each summary is followed by commentary: literary devices, character analyses, themes, and so on. Keep in mind that the interpretations here are solely those of the author of this study guide and are used to jumpstart your thinking about the work. No single interpretation of a complex work like *A Tale of Two Cities* is infallible or exhaustive, and you'll likely find that you interpret portions of the work differently from the author of this study guide. Read the original work and determine your own interpretations,

referring to these Notes for supplemental meanings only.

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# Life And Background Of The Author

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The following abbreviated biography of Charles Dickens is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Dickens' work and his life.

## Personal Background

Described as “the greatest English novelist,” Charles Dickens is studied more than any other author writing in English, except for Shakespeare. While his popularity with critics has fluctuated over time, Dickens' works have never lost their appeal for general readers, thanks to the universality of his writing. He infused his realistic depictions of society and memorable characters with enough humor and sensitivity to entertain and satisfy both casual and serious readers.

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, on February 7, 1812, to John and Elizabeth Barrow Dickens. His family moved several times during his early years and finally settled in Chatham, a seaport town in southern England, from 1817 to 1822. The Chatham years were happy ones for Dickens; he attended a good school and found much in the busy town and open countryside to entertain his active mind.

In 1822, Dickens' father's job transferred the family to London, where financial problems eventually led to John Dickens being sent to debtor's prison in 1824. Although the rest of his family joined his father in prison, twelve-year-old Charles lived alone and worked at Warren's Blacking Factory. Although the experience lasted for only a few months, it affected him deeply. Images of orphaned children and prisons would permeate his stories and books throughout his writing career.

After being removed from the factory, Dickens spent the next three years attending the Wellington House Academy, where he won a Latin prize. At the age of fifteen, he left school and began working as a solicitor's clerk at the law firm of Ellis and Blackmore. He eventually became a shorthand reporter in the Doctors' Commons law courts and then a parliamentary and news reporter for the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper. His years of observing the legal system gave him a familiarity and contempt for the law and politics, which his books echo.

After an unsuccessful courtship of Maria Beadnell, a banker's daughter whose parents viewed Dickens' family and prospects as inadequate, Dickens turned his attentions to Catherine Hogarth, daughter of journalist George Hogarth. Dickens and Catherine married on April 2, 1836, and eventually had ten children: Charles, Mary, Kate, Walter, Francis, Alfred, Sydney, Henry, Dora, and Edward.

Domestically, Dickens eventually became estranged from his wife. The couple separated in 1858, and Dickens began a relationship with actress Ellen Ternan that would last for the rest of his life. In March 1870, exhausted by his hectic schedule of readings and appearances, Dickens gave his last public reading, stating, “From these garish lights I vanish now for evermore.” Three months later, on June 9, 1870, Dickens died at age fifty-eight from a stroke and was buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. He remains one of England's most popular authors, and readers throughout the world continue to enjoy his books and



stories.

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## Career Highlights

In 1833, Dickens started publishing “sketches,” or brief, informal stories and essays, in the *Monthly Magazine* and in the *Morning Chronicle* under the pseudonym “Boz.” In February 1836, a collection of his sketches appeared as *Sketches by Boz*. Also in February, Dickens received a contract to write his first novel, a series of 20 monthly installments called *The Pickwick Papers*. The popularity of the story of Samuel

Pickwick and his Pickwick Club increased with each installment; by the last chapter, the number of copies being sold had grown from 1,000 to 40,000, an exceptional number for the time.

The success of *The Pickwick Papers* launched a new era in publishing. The concept of publishing a novel in installments was a new one at the time, but it soon caught on with other authors, including Anthony Trollope, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Wilkie Collins. Serial literature benefited the publisher, the reader, and the author through its affordability and accessibility. Publishers could introduce a new title for one-twentieth the cost of publishing an entire book, plus the advantage of selling advertising space in the publication. Meanwhile, readers gained a cheap source of literature and authors received payment for each installment, rather than waiting for the entire book to be finished before they could sell it and be paid. Writing in installments worked well for Dickens, and he used this method to publish all of his major fiction.

From 1837 to 1838, Dickens continued his literary success with *Oliver Twist*, a story of an orphan boy’s experiences with the criminal world of London. He followed that with *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), which exposed the abusive nature of Yorkshire boarding schools and narrated the humorous adventures of a traveling theater company. Victorian audiences made his next book, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), phenomenally popular—the morality tale of Little Nell roaming the countryside with her mad grandfather as they try to evade the malicious Daniel Quilp enthralled readers and sold over 100,000 copies a week.

However, the Victorian audience did not take to Dickens’ next two books, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44).

Dickens’ first historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge* dealt with the Gordon Riots that occurred in England in 1780, and its poorly structured story resulted in a steady drop in sales. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens returned to Victorian England as a setting and used the materialism of the Chuzzlewit family to highlight a theme of selfishness. *Martin Chuzzlewit* received mixed reviews and sales that improved slightly throughout the course of its publication.

Technically superior to Dickens’ earlier works, with a more cohesive plot and characters, *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) signals the beginning of Dickens’ more mature works. The novel explores the theme of pride through the story of the Dombey family, a family of wealthy merchants. Dickens followed *Dombey and Son* with *David Copperfield* (1849-50), an autobiographical novel that examines Copperfield’s early hardship and later rise to prominence through a first-person narrative.

Continuing to build upon his skills, Dickens was not afraid to experiment in his novels. In *Bleak House* (1852-53), his satire of the chancery courts and examination of Victorian society, Dickens used both a third-person narrative and a first-person narrator to connect the societal perspective with a

personal one. In his shortest book, *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens highlights industrial and educational issues through a moral fable. Meanwhile, scholars consider Dickens' eleventh novel, *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), to be one of his most difficult novels. It presents a view of society as a series of prisons, focusing especially on the oppressive natures of class privilege and religion.

Remarkably, even as Dickens became a master of his craft and enjoyed critical and popular success, he never stopped trying new approaches to telling a story. His second historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), recounts the events of the French Revolution. In it, he experimented with developing the characters through the action of the plot rather than through dialogue and detailed description.

His next book, *Great Expectations* (1860-61), focuses on the theme of corruption and follows the first person narrative of Pip, a young man trying to become a gentleman. Unlike *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* examines the coming-of-age process with irony and social insight. Dickens' last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), deals with the corrupting power of money and the superficiality of society through a third-person narrative. His final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), was left unfinished. Critics continue to debate whether the story was intended to be a study in the psychology of its characters or a murder mystery thriller.

Dickens' novels are his outstanding achievement, but he also wrote nonfiction articles, two travel books, Christmas stories, and a history of England for children. Additionally, as he steadily wrote novels, Dickens continued his journalistic career, working as an editor at the periodicals *Bentley's Miscellany* and *Master Humphrey's Clock*.

# Introduction To The Novel

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The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

## Introduction

Scholars describe *A Tale of Two Cities* as the least Dickensian of Dickens' novels, yet it remains one of Dickens' most widely read books. It was originally published in weekly installments in *All the Year Round*, from April 30 to November 29, 1859. From the book's inception, it received mixed critical reviews, but succeeded in capturing the imagination of general readers through its swift, exciting story and memorable rendering of the French Revolution.

The idea for *A Tale of Two Cities* originated in two main sources. Always interested in the interaction between individuals and society, Dickens was particularly intrigued by Thomas Carlyle's history, *The French Revolution*. He saw similarities between the forces that led to the Revolution and the oppression and unrest occurring in England in his own time. Although he supported the idea of people rising up against tyranny, the violence that characterized the French Revolution troubled him.

Dickens was also drawn to the themes inherent in *The Frozen Deep*, a play that Wilkie Collins wrote and in which Dickens acted. In the play, two men compete for the same woman, Clara Burnham. When she chooses Frank Aldersley over Richard Wardour, Wardour (played by Dickens) vows revenge upon his rival, even though he doesn't know who his rival is. While on an arctic expedition together, the two men get stranded. Wardour discovers that Aldersley is his rival, but instead of leaving him to die, Wardour overcomes his anger and saves Aldersley's life by carrying him to safety. Collapsing at Clara's feet, Wardour dies from his efforts while Clara weeps over him. The idea of Wardour's heroism and sacrifice strongly affected Dickens, and during the course of the play, as Dickens notes in the preface to *A Tale of Two Cities*, he "conceived the main idea of this story."

An examination of Dickens' personal life at the time he decided to write *A Tale of Two Cities* also reveals what may have motivated him to write this particular story. His marriage to Catherine Hogart had been deteriorating for years, and in May 1858, they decided to separate. Meanwhile, he had met a young woman named Ellen Ternan while performing in *The Frozen Deep*, and began a clandestine relationship with her that would continue until his death. Additionally, a disagreement with his publishers at *Household Words* led to his resignation as editor and the creation of a new magazine, *All the Year Round*. Dickens used *A Tale of Two Cities* to launch the new magazine, and the themes of secrecy and upheaval that run throughout the book may be reflections of the experiences Dickens was encountering in his own life.

Dickens took a different approach to writing *A Tale of Two Cities* than to his previous novels and

described the book as an experiment. Rather than relying upon dialogue to develop characters, Dickens instead relied upon the plot. Consequently, the characters are defined by their actions and by their place within the movement of the overall story. Critics have complained that this technique results in a loss of Dickens' strengths in his writing, including his sense of humor and his memorable characters. They agree, however, that Dickens' experiment created his most tightly plotted novel, in which the narrative moves along quickly and smoothly. The book's well-conceived structure neatly blends all of the storylines and characters, so that by the end of the book, no question remains as to how each element of the book impacts all the others.

Dickens' social ideas in this novel are straightforward: the French Revolution was inevitable because the aristocracy exploited and plundered the poor, driving them to revolt. Therefore, oppression on a large scale results in anarchy, and anarchy produces a police state. One of Dickens' strongest convictions was that the English people might erupt at any moment into a mass of bloody revolutionists. It is clear today that he was mistaken, but the idea was firmly planted in his mind, as well as in the minds of his contemporaries. *A Tale of Two Cities* was partly an attempt to show his readers the dangers of a possible revolution. This idea was not the first time a simple—and incorrect—conviction became the occasion for a serious and powerful work of art.

Violent revolutionary activity caught up almost all of Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century, and middle-class Englishmen naturally feared that widespread rebellion might take place at home. Dickens knew what poverty was like and how common it was. He realized the inadequacy of philanthropic institutions when confronted by the enormous misery of the slums. That Dickens turned to the French Revolution to dramatize the possibility of class uprisings is not surprising; few events in history offer such a concentration of terrors.

If the terrors of the French Revolution take a political form, the hope that Dickens holds out in this novel has distinct religious qualities. On a basic level, *A Tale of Two Cities* is a fable about resurrection, depicting the main characters, Doctor Manette, Charles Darnay, and Sydney Carton, as all being "recalled to life" in different ways. The Doctor regains his freedom and sanity, Darnay escapes a death sentence three times, and Carton redeems his soul through sacrifice. By using the theme of resurrection, Dickens demonstrates that the spiritual lives of all people depend upon the hope of renewal. Without such hope, as in the case of Madame Defarge, people lose what makes them human and resort to violence and cruelty.

In order to convey the significance of revolution and resurrection in the novel, Dickens relied upon his descriptive skills, which are perhaps at their best in *A Tale of Two Cities*. 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.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, critics began to reexamine previous assessments of *A Tale of Two Cities* based on new trends in criticism. Biographical critics read the book in terms of the revolution occurring in Dickens' life, while psychological critics analyzed the relationships between fathers and sons and the prison imagery in terms of Dickens' childhood. Meanwhile, historical and Marxist critics examined *A Tale of Two Cities* as a work of historical fiction and in terms of political overtones. Although few people champion the book as the best of Dickens' novels, critics have given it more respect and increased attention in recent decades.

Regardless of critical interest in the novel, theatrical and film interpretations of *A Tale of Two Cities* have fascinated audiences since Dickens first published the book. Various productions have retold the story of Carton's sacrifice, including one in which John Barsad saves Carton from the guillotine. The tale was especially popular with early moviegoers; five silent films of the book were made between 1908 and 1925. Since then, two more films of *A Tale of Two Cities* were made in 1935 and 1957, and the story has been repeatedly adapted for radio and television. Such frequent interpretation by the media, combined with the large number of students who read the novel each year, demonstrates that Dickens' story of revolution, sacrifice, and redemption continues to captivate modern imaginations.

## **A Brief Synopsis**

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Dickens writes in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* as he paints a picture of life in England and France. The year is late 1775, and Jarvis Lorry travels from London to Paris on a secret mission for his employer, Tellson's Bank. Joining him on his journey is Lucie Manette, a 17-year-old woman who is stunned to learn that her father, Doctor Alexandre Manette, is alive and has recently been released after having been secretly imprisoned in Paris for 18 years.

When Mr. Lorry and Lucie arrive in Paris, they find the Doctor's former servant, Ernest Defarge, caring for the him. Defarge now runs a wine-shop with his wife in the poverty-stricken quarter of Saint Antoine. Defarge takes Mr. Lorry and Lucie to the garret room where he is keeping Doctor Manette, warning them that the Doctor's years in prison have greatly changed him. Thin and pale, Doctor Manette sits at a shoemaker's bench intently making shoes. He barely responds to questions from Defarge and Mr. Lorry, but when Lucie approaches him, he remembers his wife and begins to weep. Lucie comforts him, and that night Mr. Lorry and Lucie take him to England.

Five years later, the porter for Tellson's Bank, Jerry Cruncher, takes a message to Mr. Lorry who is at a courthouse. Mr. Lorry has been called as a witness for the trial of Charles Darnay, a Frenchman accused of being a spy for France and the United States. Also at the trial are Doctor Manette and Lucie, who are witnesses for the prosecution. Doctor Manette has fully recovered and has formed a close bond with his daughter.

If found guilty of treason, Darnay will suffer a gruesome death, and the testimony of an acquaintance, John Barsad, and a former servant, Roger Cly, seems sure to result in a guilty verdict. Questions from Darnay's attorney, Mr. Stryver, indicate that Cly and Barsad are the real spies, but the turning point in the trial occurs when Sydney Carton, Stryver's assistant, points out that Carton and Darnay look alike enough to be doubles. This revelation throws into doubt a positive identification of Darnay as the person seen passing secrets, and the court acquits Darnay.

After the trial, Darnay, Carton, and Stryver begin spending time at the Manette home, obviously attracted to Lucie's beauty and kind nature. Stryver decides to propose to her, but is dissuaded by Mr. Lorry. Carton confesses his love to Lucie, but does not propose, knowing that his drunken and apathetic way of life is not worthy of her. However, he vows that he would gladly give his life to save a life she loved, and Lucie is moved by his sincerity and devotion. Eventually, it is Darnay whose love Lucie returns, and the two marry with Doctor Manette's uneasy blessing. While the couple is on their honeymoon, the Doctor suffers a nine-day relapse of his mental incapacity and believes he is making shoes in prison again.

Meanwhile, the situation in France grows worse. Signs of unrest become evident when Darnay's cruel and unfeeling uncle, the Marquis St. Evrémonte, is murdered in his bed after running down a child with his carriage in the Paris streets. Although Darnay inherits the title and the estate, he has renounced all ties to his brutal family and works instead in England as a tutor of French language and literature.

The Revolution erupts with full force in July 1789 with the storming of the Bastille. The Defarges are at the center of the revolutionary movement and lead the people in a wave of violence and destruction. By 1792, the revolutionaries have taken control of France and are imprisoning and killing anyone they view as an enemy of the state. Darnay receives a letter from the Evrémonte steward, who has been captured and who begs Darnay to come to France to save him. Feeling a sense of duty to his servant and not fully realizing the danger awaiting him, Darnay departs for France. Once he reaches Paris, though, revolutionaries take him to La Force prison "in secret," with no way of contacting anyone and with little hope of a trial.

Doctor Manette, Lucie, and Lucie's daughter soon arrive in Paris and join Mr. Lorry who is at Tellson's Paris office. Doctor Manette's status as a former prisoner of the Bastille gives him a heroic status with the revolutionaries and enables him to find out what has happened to his son-in-law. He uses his influence to get a trial for Darnay, and Doctor Manette's powerful testimony at the trial frees his son-in-law. Hours after being reunited with his wife and daughter, however, the revolutionaries again arrest Darnay, based on the accusations of the Defarges.

The next day, Darnay is tried again. This time, the Defarges produce a letter written years earlier by Doctor Manette in prison condemning all Evrémontes for the murder of Madame Defarge's family and for imprisoning the Doctor. Based on this evidence, the court sentences Darnay to death and Doctor Manette, devastated by what has happened, reverts to his prior state of dementia.

Unknown to the Manette and Darnay family, Sydney Carton has arrived in Paris and learns of Darnay's fate. He also hears of a plot contrived to send Lucie and her daughter to the guillotine. Determined to save their lives, he enlists the help of a prison spy to enter the prison where the revolutionaries are holding Darnay. He enters Darnay's cell, changes clothes with him, drugs him, and has Darnay taken out of the prison in his place. No one questions either man's identity because of the similarities in their features. As Mr. Lorry shepherds Doctor Manette, Darnay, Lucie, and young Lucie out of France, Carton goes to the guillotine, strengthened and comforted by the knowledge that his sacrifice has saved the woman he loves and her family.

# List of Characters

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**Doctor Alexandre Manette** A doctor from Beauvais, France, who was secretly imprisoned in the Bastille for 18 years and suffers some mental trauma from the experience. After being released, he is nursed back to health by his daughter, Lucie, in England. During the Revolution, he tries to save his son-in-law, Charles Darnay, from the guillotine.

**Lucie Manette, later Darnay** A beautiful young woman recognized for her kindness and compassion. After being reunited with her father, she cares for him and remains devoted to him, even after her marriage to Charles Darnay.

**Charles Darnay** A French aristocrat. Darnay renounces his family name of St. Evrémonte and moves to England, where he works as a tutor and eventually marries Lucie Manette. He is put on trial during the Revolution for the crimes of his family.

**Sydney Carton** A lawyer who looks like Charles Darnay and who lives in a fog of apathy and alcohol. His love for Lucie Manette motivates him to sacrifice his life to save the life of her husband.

**Mr. Jarvis Lorry** An English banker. A loyal friend to the Manette family, Mr. Lorry shepherds the family out of Paris after the Doctor's release from prison and during the Revolution.

**Ernest Defarge** The owner of a wine-shop in a Paris suburb. Defarge is a leader of the Jacquerie (a roving band of peasants) during the French Revolution.

**Madame Thérèse Defarge** A hard, vengeful woman who is married to Ernest Defarge. Madame Defarge knits a registry with the names of aristocrats she condemns and later leads the female revolutionaries in killing and exacting revenge on her enemies.

**Miss Pross** A forceful Englishwoman who was Lucie Manette's nursemaid. She remains Lucie's devoted servant and protector.

**Jerry Cruncher** A messenger for Tellson's Bank and Jarvis Lorry's bodyguard. He is also secretly a graverobber.

**Mrs. Cruncher** Jerry's wife. A pious woman, she is frequently beaten by her husband for praying.

**Young Jerry Cruncher** Jerry's son, who resembles his father in appearance and temperament. He assists Jerry at Tellson's.

**C. J. Stryver** A boorish lawyer who employs Sydney Carton. Stryver is Darnay's defense attorney in England and aspires briefly to marry Lucie.

**Roger Cly** A police spy in England who faked his own funeral. He appears later as a prison spy in revolutionary France.

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**John Barsad, or Solomon Pross** A police spy in England who becomes a spy in revolutionary France. Recognized as Miss Pross' brother, he is forced to help Carton save Darnay.

**Monseigneur the Marquis** A greedy, self-absorbed French aristocrat. He personifies all that is wrong with the upper classes in pre-Revolutionary France.

**Marquis St. Evrémonte** Darnay's uncle. An immoral, cruel man, he runs down a child with his carriage and is later murdered by the child's father.

**Jacques One, Two, Three, and Four** Members of the Jacquerie, the revolutionaries who organize and implement the French Revolution. The name comes from the nickname for peasants.

**Théophile Gabelle** An agent for the St. Evrémonte family. The revolutionaries imprison the man during the Revolution for handling some business affairs for Darnay. His letter begging for help sends Darnay back to France.

**Gaspard** A peasant. This man murders the Marquis St. Evrémonte for running down and killing his child.

**Road-mender and Wood-sawyer** A peasant. This man becomes a bloodthirsty revolutionist.

**Young Lucie Darnay** The daughter of Lucie and Charles Darnay. Madame Defarge threatens her life during the Reign of Terror.

**Foulon** A callous prison official who faked his own death. He is hanged and decapitated by a mob after they storm the Bastille.

**The Vengeance** The grocer's wife. Turned vicious by the Revolution, she becomes Madame Defarge's main companion.

**A Seamstress** A frightened young woman who is executed with Carton. She and Carton comfort each other on the way to the guillotine.



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