A Tale of Two Cities

Discussion Questions

1. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with a passage that has become one of English literature's best known: "It was the best of times..." It is a passage well worth parsing. What does Dickens mean by setting the stage with such polarities? For whom was it the best and the worst of times? Dickens also mentions that the era about which he writes was very much "like the present period," which when he was writing meant the late 1850s. Why does this passage continue to be quoted today? In what ways does our own present period merit such an assessment?

2. The novel takes place, per its title, in two cities: London and Paris. What are some of the differences between these two cities? Between their denizens? What about characters who travel—or move residence—from one to another? What about each of the cities themselves: how are they divided in two?

3. Why does Dickens describe Madame Defarge, several times in her early scenes, as seeing nothing? Why does this depiction of her change?

4. Why was Charles Darnay able to see the unfairness of the class structure that privileged him and to extricate himself from it? Are there other characters as capable of seeing beyond their own circumstances?

5. Dickens seems to have great sympathy for the poor, the sick, the powerless, but not all such characters are portrayed sympathetically. What does that say about his sympathies? Where does he intend our—the readers’—sympathies to lie?

6. The news that Doctor Manette, while imprisoned, denounced all the descendents of the Evrémondes comes as a shock. Given that he saw young Charles and spoke with his beleaguered, compassionate mother—that he, in effect, had reason to have compassion toward them despite the evils of the family—why would he have made such a declaration? What can we make of his repeated claim in the letter read aloud during Darnay's retrial that he was in his right mind? How does he really feel about Darnay and his marriage to Lucie?

7. What is Defarge's motive in betraying Doctor Manette, endangering his daughter and grandchild, and framing Darnay? How might the relationship between Madame and Monsieur be described?
8. Carton's background is alluded to, though we never quite learn the source(s) of his disappointment and degeneracy. What might have happened in his past?

9. Late in the novel, Carton is described as showing both pity and pride. "Pride" is a word we have not heretofore seen associated with Carton, who is full of mostly suppressed regret and anguish over his wasted life. What is Carton proud of, and do others see it? Does Dickens intend to convey that others see his pride?

10. Carton has clearly misused his youthful promise and believes himself to be unredeemable. Does this view of himself actually change, and if so, how? Is Carton a man of faith? Does he become one?

11. Lucie finds "faith" in Carton, described as a "lost man," after he confides in her. Does Lucie come to understand Carton? How? Does she believe that he can be saved from himself?

12. Dickens prefaces the final paragraphs of the novel, which are in Carton's voice, by noting that "if he had given any utterance to his thoughts, and they were prophetic, they would have been these." How might we read the vision expressed in these words? Are we meant to take these thoughts as prophetic—that is, as a portrayal of what actually came after the end of the novel, in both France and in England? Among the beloved friends he has left behind?

13. The vision expressed in Carton's supposed final words includes one for the country and its people after the newest "oppressors" are themselves put to death. What would such a post-Revolution world be like, and how could it be achieved?

14. The French Revolution was of great interest to Americans in the early days of their own republic. Given today's polarities of extreme wealth and poverty and strongly expressed patriotism, as well as the interest in early America, what parallels might we draw between our own time in early twenty-first-century America and what happens in *A Tale of Two Cities*? What lessons?

*(Questions issued by Penguin Group USA-Oprah's Book Club edition.)*