Introducing the Novel

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

—from A Tale of Two Cities

With these famous words, Dickens begins *A Tale of Two Cities*. In 1859, the year in which *A Tale of Two Cities* was published, Dickens was probably the most popular author of his time.

Dickens had grown increasingly dismayed at the social and economic inequality of British society—the terrible living conditions of the urban poor, an arrogant and uncaring ruling class, and the ravages of the Industrial Revolution. The novels he wrote just before *A Tale of Two Cities*—*Bleak House* (1852–53), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1855–57)—reflect his darker view of society. While it was the best of times for England's wealthy, with their town homes and country estates, Dickens believed that times had never been worse for the nation's poor. Hunger, disease, poverty, and ignorance characterized the daily fabric of their lives. Dickens had little hope that a social upheaval, like the one that shook France just half a century earlier, could be avoided.

Even though Dickens's mind was troubled during this period of his life, all was not gloomy. He had met and fallen in love with a young actress named Ellen Ternan. She was a petite blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman whom scholars feel is the model for Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. New beginnings—like the ones in Dickens's life—became an important theme in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The title of the first book of *A Tale of Two Cities*, "Recalled to Life," probably had special meaning for Dickens in the late 1850s.

The novel tells the story of people whose lives are interrupted or wasted, then reawakened with a new purpose. It shows how the mistakes of the past and the evil they cause can be turned into triumphs through suffering and virtuous actions.

Stylistically, *A Tale of Two Cities* was something new for Dickens. Unlike most of his novels, the book is not set in the England of Dickens's own time, and it is his only book that takes place mostly in a foreign country. More importantly, the book lacks the huge comic gallery of whimsical and eccentric characters that made Dickens famous. There is no Scrooge, no Fagin, and no Mr. Pickwick. There is very little of the humor that made Dickens's readers laugh, and few of the touching sentimental episodes that made them weep.

Instead, Dickens chose to make the plot the centerpiece of this novel. He called it "the best story I have written." Critics have praised the way all the events relate to the progress of destiny. Several of the characters are symbolic representations of ideas rather than real-life individuals. One such character does not even have a name. The novel is rich in its detailed descriptions, its panoramic sweep of history, and its suspense, mystery, and terror. It is not surprising that *A Tale of Two Cities* has been filmed so many times.

Dickens hoped to make the wider historical events of the French Revolution understandable by portraying the personal struggles of one group of people. In the preface to the novel, however, he also gives readers a clue about the meaning the book had in his personal life:

*Throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me; I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself.*

It is not hard to read into these lines Dickens's own feeling of being trapped by overwhelming duties and responsibilities. But the lines may also express the liberating emotion Dickens felt at being, like Dr. Manette of the novel, "recalled to life."

THE TIME AND PLACE

The action of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place over a period of about eighteen years, beginning in 1775 and ending in 1793. Some of the story takes place earlier, as told in the flashback. A *flashback* reveals something that happened before that point in the story or before the story began. It provides information to help explain key events in the story.
In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the key events take place just before and during the French Revolution. The novel is set mostly in London and Paris, with some chapters set in rural France and the English port city of Dover. The novel—Dickens's twelfth—was published in the author's new magazine, *All the Year Round*, from April to November 1859, and in book form the same year.

**Did You Know?**

The French Revolution was one of the most important events of the 1700s, and its influence was still strong in Charles Dickens's time. The revolution began in 1789 with the attack on the notorious prison, the Bastille—a key event in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Throughout the revolution's different phases, various elected bodies ruled France, but none enjoyed total support of the people. Several forces resorted to terrorism to defeat their political opponents.

In addition to national turmoil, France was struggling with other countries in Europe. France's revolutionary government frightened Europe's monarchs, who feared that the spread of democratic ideas would bring an end to their power. The European monarchs sent troops to end the threat to their thrones. Wars raged for six years. The French government had many problems to deal with, including opposition from some French citizens. In 1799, certain political leaders plotted to overthrow the current government. They chose the French general Napoleon Bonaparte to help them. Bonaparte quickly took power and crowned himself emperor a few years later.

Though historians may disagree on some points, they generally cite five reasons why the revolution occurred: France could not produce enough food to feed its people; the newly wealthy middle-class was without political power; peasants hated the ancient feudal system, in which they were forced to work for local nobles; new ideas about social and political reforms were spreading; and the French aristocracy...