Tale of Two Cities – Discussion Questions

Completely and succinctly, answer the following questions.

French Revolution – 1789-1799 – although the rumblings of revolution began years prior to the 1789 as crops failed and people were starving with little aid from the government the rebelled

Industrial Revolution – 1750s-1850s – change in economy from rural farming to urban manufacturing and commerce. A rise in wealth overall, but development of slums and poor living conditions that spread more disease and discord.

Tale of Two Cities – first published in serial form from April – November 1859.

Book the First

1. What is the significance of the title of Book the First, “Recalled to Life”?
2. What is the subject of Jarvis Lorry’s dream? How does this relate to the literal events of the story?
3. With whom has Dr. Manette been staying since his release from prison? In what activity does his hostess constantly engage?
4. What is your opinion of the scene in which Dr. Manette meets Lucie in the attic room? Do you find it real and convincing, or sentimental and corny, or something else? Explain your answer, citing evidence from the text.
5. Think of the scene in which the residents of Saint Antoine scurry after the spilled wine. What does the behavior of the residents suggest to you about them?
6. The opening paragraph of A Tale of Two Cities is one of the most famous in all of English literature. It is an example of parallelism, the repeated use of words, phrases, or sentences that have similar grammatical form. Analyze how Dickens uses parallelism to state themes that might be developed in the novel. Point to examples from Book the First that continue the development of themes introduced in the opening paragraph.

Book the Second

7. To what person does the title of Book the Second, “The Golden Thread,” refer? Why is this title a good one?
8. Why has Charles Darnay given up his inheritance? What is his uncle’s reaction to his decision?
9. One of the titles for this novel that Dickens considered and rejected was Buried Alive. In what ways might this have been an appropriate title?
10. Why do you think Sydney Carton resents Charles Darnay? Does this seem like a realistic response to their personal situations? Explain your answer?
11. What kind of a person is Sydney Carton? Find and discuss evidence in the text that offers clues to Carton’s character. Write down words and phrases that reveal important elements about Carton. Be sure to write down specific page numbers for your evidence so that you may refer back to the text. Discuss such questions as: What is Carton’s opinion about himself? What negative traits does he possess? What positive ones? How does he exhibit these traits? Why does he seem to be such an outsider? Does the reader’s opinion of Carton change during this section? If so, what actions cause this change? In your answer, refer to specific pages of the novel.
12. What is Jerry Cruncher’s secret nighttime activity? What important theme of the novel does this activity reinforce?
13. What hidden function does Madame Defarge’s constant knitting serve? In what way does it affect the life of Charles Darnay?
14. Where does Monsieur Defarge ask a guard to take him during the attack on the Bastille? What does he do there?
15. Several years pass in Chapter 21 and between Chapters 23 and 24. Why might the author have skipped over these years? How does the passing of time contribute to the larger effect of the novel?
16. Why, do you think, does Darnay decide to return to France? Why is he drawn to the danger even though he knows the risks?

17. One of the key motifs of A Tale of Two Cities is the role of fate. Dickens often uses the character of Madame Defarge to represent fate and to deny the idea that individuals’ choices can make a difference in life. Her knitting links her to three Greek goddesses, known as the Fates, who were in charge of the birth, life, and death of all people. One goddess spun the thread of life, another measured it, and the third cut it. Examine the dialogue and descriptions of Madame Defarge in Chapters 15 and 16 of this section. Look for her attitudes about revenge, time, and individual choice, paying special attention to the images she uses. Then discuss of how Dickens uses Madame Defarge to represent the idea of fate.

18. Numerous critics have noted that the villains in Charles Dickens’s novels tend to be more interesting, alive, compelling, and memorable to readers than the “good” characters, or heroes. Discuss whether you agree with this opinion. Focus your discussion on characters like Lucie Manette, Charles Darnay, and Madame Defarge. Cite examples from the text to illustrate the points you make.

Book the Third

19. What is the significance of the title of Book the Third? In what earlier scene did Dickens refer to an approaching storm?

20. What effect does Madame Defarge have on Lucie when the Defarges visit Lucie’s apartment? How does Dickens symbolically show this effect?

21. How is Dr. Manette changed by saving Charles Darnay? How does he now look on his long years of imprisonment?

22. How would you describe the character of The Vengeance? Does she seem like a real person to you? What, do you think, is the reason Dickens does not give her a real name?

23. Do you think that good consequences can ever come from violent beginnings? Explain your answer in context with the novel.

24. Ghosts appear in the novel at key moments, such as when Jarvis Lorry dreams about a specter “recalled to life” from the grave in Book the First. The use of ghosts and dreams helps blur the boundaries between the real and the unreal. Analyze the scene in Book the Third, Chapter 1, in which Darnay sees the imprisoned aristocrats. Pay attention to the words used and the atmosphere created. Explain of how the scene reflects the idea of reality and unreality and connects to other scenes in the novel.

25. At what points in the story does Dickens change from the past tense to the present tense, and from third-person to first-person narration? What do these changes accomplish?

26. What explanation does Dr. Manette’s letter provide for the actions and vengefulness of Madame Defarge?

27. What does Miss Pross do to protect Lucie and her child? What sacrifice must she make to defend them? Is Lucie deserving?

28. Readers of A Tale of Two Cities have argued for decades over Dickens’s attitude towards the French Revolution. His portrayal of the French aristocracy is laced with contempt and disgust, and he strongly ridicules their treatment of the poor. However, he also blames the revolutionaries for reacting to the centuries of injustice by creating blood-soaked injustices of their own. This section of the novel contains the author’s final words on his view of the French Revolution. Locate and analyze these passages for evidence of Dickens’s attitude toward the Revolution. Is he more sympathetic to either side? Explain.

29. Some people believe that entire groups or societies bear the responsibility for the actions of individual members of that society. Madame Defarge, in deciding to target all the members of the Evrémonde family—even those who took no part in the cruelties of the past—shows she believes in collective guilt. Discuss the question of collective guilt. Is it appropriate (at times)? Examine Madame Defarge’s reasoning for assigning guilt to Darnay, Lucie, and even little Lucie, supporting your argument with examples from the text.