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A Tale of Two Cities & the French Revolution

Introduction

A Tale of Two Cities in Illustration and Art

A Tale of Two Cities is a novel about broad social and historical events. As its title indicates, it focuses on two contrasting settings—London and Paris in the late 1700s. It also provides a dramatic account of one of the greatest political upheavals of all time, the French Revolution. But the novel is primarily about a small group of individuals caught up in and confronted with these vast historical forces. They face a key question: How do we act in the face of such forces in order to retain our humanity and our morality? It is this question that makes the novel an ideal one to include in the MindSparks Great Literature in Illustration & Art series.

As with each of the teacher's guides in this series, this one uses twelve illustrations to focus on a number of major themes in one great novel. The illustrations help provide historical or social context and a dramatic focus for activities exploring the novel in greater depth. That focus, however, is not solely on historical setting. The activities and discussion points that accompany each image relate that image both to the historical context and to key themes in the novel itself. Our goal is a unique fusion of art, literature, and historical background information.

The twelve illustrations are grouped into four lessons (three illustrations per lesson). Each of these lessons explores one broad topic in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

France: The Old Order

The three illustrations in this lesson focus on the conditions that led to the revolutionary outburst in France in 1789. They help provide insight into one of the two key settings of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

England in the Late 1700s

The other main setting for the novel is England in the late 1700s. Dickens was ambivalent about his own country, and in the novel its injustices are fully explored. But so, too, are its moral strengths, which in Dickens's view could still save it from France's fate. The images in this lesson attempt to capture both aspects of this view of England.

Revolutionary France

The French Revolution was not just the wild and vengeful explosion of a violent and impoverished people. But that is the aspect of the upheaval stressed in the novel. The images here focus on the role of the populace in the revolution, and on the moral challenge such mass upheavals pose to the individual who is caught up in them.

Dickens's London

In a sense, the London of Dickens's own time is as much a setting for *A Tale of Two Cities* as is eighteenth-century France and England. For that reason, the illustrations in this lesson draw attention to the economic and political tensions building in England in the mid-1800s, during the early stages of its Industrial Revolution. These gave the novel a contemporary significance that, in many ways, it still has today.

Using Visual Images in the Classroom

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, all of which include an emotional power and the ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images. To order MindSparks, or for more information, just call toll-free: 1-800-421-4246.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three cartoons per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET

This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

A Tale of Two Cities & the French Revolution**OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand why the anger of the poor in France was rising in the years before the French Revolution.
2. Students will better understand the background for the main events in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

France: The Old Order

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS**Illustration 1**

The main setting for *A Tale of Two Cities* is France in the late 1700s. France at that time was ruled by a king and a highly privileged class of noble, or aristocratic, families. These aristocrats held most key offices in the government and the Catholic Church. Many of them spent much of their lives waiting on the king at his beautiful palace of Versailles, near Paris. There, they passed the time flattering top government officials, seeking favors, gossiping, and living in idle luxury. On their own estates, they had done little to develop their farmlands. Increasingly, the nobles as a class were seen as unproductive and silly. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, they are also portrayed as proud, cruel, and dangerously out of touch with the anger building up all around them. This illustration of a group of courtiers at Versailles appears to take a similar view of France's nobility.

Illustration 2

By the 1780s, France was deep in debt from wars and other wasteful expenses. The poor peasants in the countryside paid a huge share of the nation's taxes, while the nobles and clergy paid little or nothing. Food shortages and high prices were adding to the misery of the poor in the cities as well as the countryside. In this drawing, a number of desperately poor French peasants beg for crumbs from a wealthy traveler passing by. The drawing forces us to think about what the well-off in any society owe to the poor among them. This is a key theme in *A Tale of Two Cities*, as it is in many other works by Charles Dickens.

Illustration 3

This drawing shows the anger the French peasants felt about their plight in the late 1700s. In it, a strong peasant woman is carrying a nun and a rich and silly looking noble on her back. The drawing is titled "The Great Abuse." It pictures the upper classes as worthless drones living off the labor of the poor. In 1789, mounting government debt forced King Louis XVI to ask for more taxes again. By that time, France was like a bomb, about to go off. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the anger of the downtrodden is often pictured as a blind force of nature—a volcano or a raging sea. The illustration helps to explain what was fueling this deep anger.

Illustration 1



Corbis-Bettmann

Discussing the Illustration

1. This drawing shows a group of French nobles in the 1700s relaxing and enjoying a meal together. Can you explain who the nobles, or aristocrats, were as a group and what their place was in French society in the 1700s?
2. The nobles shown here were also courtiers who spent their time at Versailles, as did thousands of wealthy nobles in France in the 1700s. What is a courtier, and why would French courtiers have been at Versailles?
3. While these nobles appear to be rich, not all nobles were rich. What features in this illustration tell you these nobles are wealthy?
4. One book includes this caption with this drawing: "Fashionable courtiers enjoy a gourmet repast after a busy, unproductive day." Why is this a good caption for the drawing? How accurately does it describe the nobles of eighteenth century France generally?
5. What aspects of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* does this illustration most help to clarify? Why?

Follow-up Activities

1. French courtiers often lived idle lives of luxury, but they also competed bitterly for the attention of the king or other wealthy nobles. A view of this is presented in book the second, chapter 7, of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Read this chapter, about a great lord named only "Monseigneur" and the Marquis of Evremonde. Try to imagine what kind of mood the marquis would have been in at the end of the day described in chapter 7. Pretend you are the marquis and write a long diary entry about the events of that day. Share this entry in class.
2. Read a biography or an article about King Louis XIV of France. Louis XIV lived from 1638 to 1714. Make sure the book or article describes in detail the daily duties of courtiers at Versailles. Based on what you learn, make up an imaginary daily schedule for a courtier at Versailles. Use this schedule to spark a class discussion about why Louis XIV had the courtiers live this way and about whether this was good or bad for France as a whole.