

# A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens [B2]

La rivoluzione francese spazzò via istituzioni centenarie come la monarchia e il feudalesimo, preparando il terreno per una successiva fioritura delle democrazie. Il romanzo di cui parliamo si svolge in questo contesto di violenza.



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In 1859 English writer Charles Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, a serialised [page-turner](#) set in London and Paris during the French Revolution. The protagonist is a French doctor called Manette who, after spending nearly two decades in prison in Paris, is reunited with his lost daughter Lucie, who lives in London. The book begins with one of the most famous paragraphs in English literature. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.” “Era il tempo migliore e il tempo peggiore, la stagione della saggezza e la stagione della follia, l’epoca della fede e l’epoca dell’incredulità, il periodo della luce e il periodo delle tenebre, la primavera della speranza e l’inverno della disperazione. Avevamo

tutto dinanzi a noi, non avevamo nulla dinanzi a noi; eravamo tutti diretti al cielo, eravamo tutti diretti a quell'altra parte”.

## REUNITED AT LAST

It is England, 1775. Both French and English society are **plagued** by **social ills**. Lucie Manette believes she is an orphan, but discovers that her father, Doctor Manette, is alive in Paris. She travels there to find he had spent eighteen years **locked up** in the Bastille, a **notorious** state prison. She takes him to England. Meanwhile, in a poor suburb of Paris, desperation is reaching its **tipping point**. In a **foreboding** scene, wine from Monsieur Defarge's shop **spills** onto the street and **peasants dive in** to **lick it up**. They become **stained** blood red. “The wine was red wine, and had **stained** the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had **stained** many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby was **stained** with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head.” “Il vino era vino rosso, e aveva macchiato il suolo dell'angusta stradiciola del sobborgo Sant'Antonio in Parigi, dove s'era riversato. Aveva macchiato anche molte mani, molti visi, molti piedi nudi, e molti zoccoli. Le mani di colui che segava le legna lasciarono molte macchie rosse sui vari pezzi segati; e la fronte della donna che allattava il bambino, si tinse delle macchie del vecchio cencio ch'ella si era legato di nuovo intorno al capo. Quelli che si erano avidamente lanciati sui pezzi delle doghe portavano intorno alle labbra una traccia da tigri, e certo spilungone burlone, con la testa più fuori che dentro un rozzo sacco che gli serviva da berretto, scarabocchiò sui muro, col dito intinto nella feccia del vino: «Sangue»”.

## A LASTING PHILOSOPHY

It is London, 1780. French **émigré** Charles Darnay has been **acquitted** of treason against the British Crown. **Relieved**, he travels to Paris to visit his uncle, the Marquis St. Evrémonde. Darnay is shocked when his uncle treats a **peasant** cruelly, justifying his actions with the following words: “Repression

is the only lasting philosophy. The dark deference of fear and slavery, my friend,' observed the Marquis, 'will keep the dogs obedient to the whip, as long as this roof,' looking up to it, 'shuts out the sky.'" "— La repressione è l'unica filosofia durevole. La torva deferenza della paura e della schiavitù, caro, — osservò il marchese, — terrà i cani obbedienti alla frusta, finchè questo tetto, — aggiunse, levando gli occhi al soffitto, — escluderà il cielo". Disgusted, Darnay renounces his identity, and returns to England. That night, the Marquis is murdered.

## THE KNITTED REGISTER

It is London, [a year on](#). Darnay has received permission to marry Lucie. Meanwhile, in Paris, Madame Defarge sits in her husband's wine shop [knitting](#) a secret [registry](#) of those who will be executed in the Revolution. Her husband is proud of her skills. "Knitted, in her own stitches and her own symbols, it will always be as plain to her as the sun. Confide in Madame Defarge. It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge." "— Giacomo, — rispose Defarge, ergendosi col petto, — se madama mia moglie si fosse assunta di tenere il registro solo con la memoria, non ne perderebbe una parola... non una sola sillaba. Intrecciato nelle sue maglie e nei suoi simboli, esso le sarà più chiaro del sole. Lascia fare a mia moglie. Sarebbe più facile per il più fiacco poltrone di questo mondo cancellarsi dall'esistenza, che cancellare una lettera del suo nome o dei suoi delitti dal registro a maglia di mia moglie". It is Paris, 1789. Peasants [storm](#) the Bastille and the French Revolution is [underway](#). While revolutionaries kill aristocrats in the streets, Madame Defarge continues to knit.

## THE REIGN OF TERROR

It is Paris, 1792, during a [notoriously](#) bloody period of the Revolution. A man known to Darnay writes to him [to beg](#) for help. Darnay arrives in Paris, but is arrested there by revolutionaries. Lucie and Manette go there in the hope of saving him. At Darnay's [trial](#), [damning evidence](#) leads to his being

condemned to death for the crimes of his ancestors. However, Madame Defarge also [plots](#) to have Lucie and their daughter, little Lucie, executed too. Can the Manettes escape in time — or will they all go to the guillotine? Written in brilliant [yet](#) sometimes difficult to follow Victorian prose, *A Tale of Two Cities* has been adapted for the screen many times. It has also inspired many productions, including Christopher Nolan's Batman movie *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

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# Glossary

- **page-turner** = libro avvincente
- **notorious** = famigerata
- **lick it up** = leccare
- **emigré** = emigrato
- **acquitted** = assolvere
- **Relieved** = sollevato
- **peasant** = contadino
- **storm** = assaltare
- **underway** = in marcia
- **to beg** = supplicare
- **yet** = sebbene
- **plagued** = tormentare
- **locked up** = rinchiuso
- **tipping point** = punto di non ritorno
- **foreboding** = premonitrice
- **a year on** = un anno dopo
- **trial** = giudizio
- **social ills** = mali sociali
- **stained** = macchiare
- **registry** = registro
- **damning evidence** = prova schiacciante
- **spills** = fuoriuscire
- **dive in** = tuffarsi
- **knitting** = tessere
- **plots** = tramare