A Tale of Two Cities
by Charles Dickens

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"
Charles Dickens

- Born in 1812 in Portsmouth, England
- He had very encouraging parents who supported his writing and acting
- His father was sent to debtor’s prison
  - At the age of 12, Dickens started working in a rat-infested warehouse—12 hour days, six days a week—in an attempt to help his family get out of debt
  - He saw firsthand what life was like for those in prison
  - A change of fortune rescued the family, but not before the experience negatively affected Dickens
Charles Dickens

- Before writing fiction, Dickens worked as an actor, a court reporter, and a journalist

- At 24, he published his first novel serially; many subsequent novels were published in this manner
  - Serial publication forced Dickens to carefully construct his stories to ensure continuity
  - He became an expert at weaving intricate and suspenseful novels with humorous protagonists and horrifying villains
  - The serial publication form heightens suspense and anticipation.
  - *A Tale of Two Cities* was published in weekly installments from April 1859 – November 1859. It was his 12th novel.
  - With over 200 million copies sold, it is the biggest selling novel in history.
A TALE OF TWO CITIES.

In three Books. By Charles Dickens.

BOOK THE FIRST. RECALLED TO LIFE.

CHAPTER I. THE PERIOD.

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; we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct to Hell.

The period in which we live, the period that some of the noblest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of compassion on earth, was a period of exultation and despair; a period of crise and disturbance; a period of universal change.

There was a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there was a king with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the eyes of the State preserves and fables, that things in general were settled for ever.

It was the year of Our Lord one thousand thousand two hundred and fifty-five. Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, so at this. Mrs. Southcote had recently attained her twenty-first Biedermeier birthday, of whom a prophetic private in the Life Guards had heralded the sublime appearance of ignominy announcing that arrangements were made for the swallowing up of London and Westminster. Even the Cok-lahn ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years, after rapping out its messages, as the spirits of this very last past (supernaturally deficient in originality) rapped out theirs. More messages in the clear order of events had lately come to the English Crown and Parliament, from a congress of British subjects in disguise, announcing that arrangements were made for the swallowing up of London and Westminster. Even the Cok-lahn ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years, after rapping out its messages, as the spirits of this very last past (supernaturally deficient in originality) rapped out theirs. More messages in the clear order of events had lately come to the English Crown and Parliament, from a congress of British subjects in disguise, announcing that arrangements were made for the swallowing up of London and Westminster.

The Dover road lay, as to him, beyond the Dover mail, as it lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He was on the opposite side of the road, as the rest of the passengers did; not because they had the least relish for walking exasperatingly about with their knapsacks on their backs, because the road was as steep and full of turns, and the harness, and the mail, were all so heavy, that the horses had three times in the day come to a stop, and visibly conduct their Greatnesses, and sprites of small creatures—the creatures of this chronicle among the rest—along the roads that lay before them.

CHAPTER II. THE MAIL.

It was the Dover road that lay, on a Friday night late in November, before the first of the post-chaises, with a rate of twenty-five miles an hour. The Dover road lay, as to him, beyond the Dover mail, as it lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He was on the opposite side of the road, as the rest of the passengers did; not because they had the least relish for walking exasperatingly about with their knapsacks on their backs, because the road was as steep and full of turns, and the harness, and the mail, were all so heavy, that the horses had three times in the day come to a stop, and visibly conduct their Greatnesses, and sprites of small creatures—the creatures of this chronicle among the rest—along the roads that lay before them.

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Some general info:

- (1812 – 1870) 1 wife; 10 children
- Charles Dickens is one of the premier English novelists of the Victorian Era, which took place 1840-1900, after Romanticism.
- A common thread throughout his works is his criticism and commentary on social injustices and hypocrisy; he especially focused on this as it pertained to children.
• Dickens and his wife, Catherine Hogarth, traveled around the world as he performed dramatic readings from his novels and spoke on political issues (i.e. in favor of abolishing slavery).

• He and his wife married in 1838, had nine children, separated in 1858.

• Rumor has it (actually – it’s a fact – I just wanted to say that line from Adele’s song) that Dickens fell in love with another woman, and that’s why his marriage ended.
Dickens

• In 1857, a middle-aged Charles Dickens fell in love with a teenager, Ellen “Nelly” Ternan.
• She had been hired to star in one of his theatrical productions.
• He moved out of his home and separated from his wife before beginning the affair.
• The affair only ended with his death 13 years later.
• He hid it so effectively that it only became public knowledge in 1939.
Dickens

• At that time (1939), the affair was discovered by one of his biographers who also found out the two had a child together who died in infancy.
• Dickens was a man driven by an extraordinary, obsessive passion.
• He took enormous risks embarking on this “passion.”
• He was a literary superstar who had set himself up as a paragon of family virtue.
• Society viewed him as a cross between Father Christmas, Prince Albert, and God
Dickens

- The affair affected his writing as well. One of his biographers remarks, “The affair helped me to understand the feeling of frustrated passion that runs through his later books and why there is a sense of these threatening characters who want to uncover dark secrets.

- When Dickens keeled over from a stroke in 1870, at the age of only 58, it was arguably the effort of maintaining his double life that had killed him.
Dickens

- Although he’s famous for his writing, above all, Dickens was a **social reformist**.
- *A Tale of Two Cities* is his warning that social reform is necessary unless England wants to experience its own revolution (like the French.)
- The novel shows his real and reasonable fear of the time.
- Picture this: between 1305 -1705, life is not notably different in England.
- It’s a pastoral, rural existence.
Then...

- BAM! In 50 years, everything drastically changes with the Industrial Revolution.
- A modern day equivalent would be life pre-Internet, pre-digital, pre-smart phone vs NOW.
- We couldn’t go back, even if we wanted to.
- The same was true in England.
- With the invention of railroads, steam engines, and factories came a mass influx of population to the cities.
- England’s cities were not able to support this.
As a result...

- People lived in horribly crowded quarters.
- This overcrowding causes an increase in crime, theft, cruelty, and prostitution.
- Due to the overcrowding, disease is rampant in England.
  - 2000 people per week die of cholera in England at this time.
  - Bronchitis and tuberculosis are epidemics
- Children are forced to work in factories without any regulations.
  - Some kids were literally caught up in machines and ground up, or at the very least, they lost limbs.
The victims...

- Those in power saw no need to change anything. Life at the top was fine. The rich and privileged were happy.
- Obviously, the poor were the biggest victims in this situation.
- Women and children, especially, were the most vulnerable.
- Dickens knows this, and he is speaking for them in this novel.
- He never loses hope.
- He says, “Hey! This isn’t good enough. We have to do better!”
- He acknowledges that, yes, things are awful, but they don’t always have to be this way.
- We can change them.
- He uses the POWER OF THE PEN to do this.
His legacy

- Charles Dickens is considered to be the greatest master of the English language, second only to Shakespeare. The same goes for his characterization.

- How cool is that to be an amazing novelist, and you’re doing it all to better the world by bringing about social change. What a legacy to leave behind!
In all of Dickens’s books...

- He speaks for the most vulnerable.
- He calls out a system or institution and holds its feet to the fire.
- In *A Christmas Carol*, he is calling out the very wealthy: think Ebenezer Scrooge.
- In *Nicholas Nickelby*, he’s calling out the educational system in England.
- In *Great Expectations*, he is denouncing Victorian England.
- You can be the judge of who he is scorning in *A Tale of Two Cities*. 