Chapter I

The Period

A Tale of Two Cities begins with an expository chapter that establishes both setting and context. Dickens describes the period of the French Revolution in terms of a series of paradoxes, cleverly highlighting the dichotomous, contrasting elements in French and English society of that period. In addition, Dickens is actually using these same paradoxes to sensitize England to the problems of his own era. Vivid description evokes a real sense of the evils and injustices of the day, as the reader prepares for a complex tale that is intricately tied to its backdrop.

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 — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison* only.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State that things in general were settled forever. (2)

It was the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. France rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it.

She entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his body burned alive. (3)

It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework* with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history.

It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses* of some *tillers* of the heavy

FYI The "king with a large jaw" and the "queen with a plain face" are King George III (1738-1820) and Queen Charlotte (1744-1818) of England; the "king with a large jaw" and the "queen with a fair face" are King Louis XVI (1754-1793) and Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) of France.

What rhetorical technique does the author use in the first paragraph? What is the author's tone?

What is happening in France?

What is the tone of Dickens' remarks about France's "humane achievements"?

Why is Fate called "the Woodman"?

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superlative degree of comparison — the highest degree of comparison of adjectives and adverbs, such as *best* and *worst*.

movable framework — here, the guillotine, soon to become the method of execution used by the revolutionaries.

outhouses — here, farm buildings used for storage.

(2) Ironically, government officials in both France and England are overly confident that the status quo will be preserved; the French government has no inkling that rebellion is brewing. Dickens is clearly warning his own country, England, not to make the same tragic mistake.

(3) The narrator's sharp criticism grows out of his real-life preoccupation (as a result of his father's incarceration in Marshalsea prison when Dickens was a boy) with the English penal system and the sufferings and punishments of prisoners. Most of Dickens' novels contain at least one convict or a prison scene.

What rhetorical technique does the author use in the first paragraph? What is the author's tone?

A. The author uses paradox to establish the ambivalence and dichotomy that characterized the period in various ways. This use of paradox foreshadows the many other contradictions and contrasting elements that will appear throughout the novel. The tone of the paragraph is melancholy yet hopeful, while the pronoun "we" draws the reader into the narrator's world, making it clear that Dickens is directly addressing his audience.

What is happening in France?

A. By printing and spending vast amounts of money, France has created inflation and, as a result, is headed for fiscal ruin.

What is the tone of Dickens' remarks about France's "humane achievements"?

A. Dickens' remarks are heavily laden with bitter irony, referring to the torture of a lad as a "humane achievement" and a form of entertainment.

Why is Fate called "the Woodman"?

A. The narrator calls Fate the Woodman because the fate that he refers to is the death provided by that "movable framework" made out of wood from the trees of the forests of France and Norway.

Why do the Woodman and Farmer work silently?

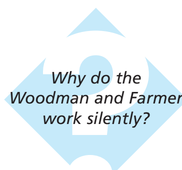
A. The masses, whose misery was daily moving them to the point of revolution, knew that they must plan silently, for fear of being accused of sacrilege and treason, for the noble classes believed in the Divine Right of Kings. Consequently, the nobles ignore all evidence of unrest, allowing Fate and Death to prepare quietly for the revolution.

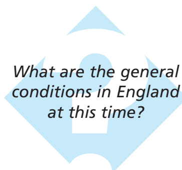
What are the general conditions in England at this time?

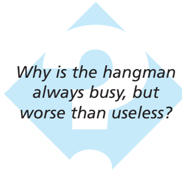
A. Brazen lawlessness was prevalent in England; armed robbery was frequent, and robbers commonly broke into people's homes and stole even the furniture.

Why is the hangman always busy, but worse than useless?

A. Crime was so rampant that the hangman was continually carrying out executions. Yet, despite the fact that capital punishment was commonplace, fear of execution failed to deter would-be criminals and crime continued, unabated.







lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, (4) rude carts, bespattered with *rustic mire*, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils* of the Revolution. But that Woodman and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as to entertain any suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous.

In England, there was scarcely an amount of order and protection to justify much national boasting. Daring burglaries by armed men, and highway robberies, took place in the capital itself every night; families were publicly cautioned not to go out of town without removing their furniture to upholsterers' warehouses for security; the highwayman in the dark was a City tradesman in the light, and, being recognised and challenged by his fellow-tradesman whom he stopped in his character of "the Captain," gallantly shot him through the head and rode away; prisoners in London gaols fought battles with their turnkeys*, and the majesty of the law fired blunderbusses* in among them, loaded with rounds of shot and ball; thieves snipped diamonds from the

necks of noble lords at Court drawing-rooms; musketeers* went into St. Giles's,* to search for contraband* goods, and the mob fired on the musketeers, and the musketeers fired on the mob, and nobody thought any of these occurrences much out of the common way. In the midst of them, the hangman, ever busy and ever worse than useless, was in constant requisition; now, stringing up long rows of miscellaneous criminals; now, hanging a housebreaker on Saturday who had been taken on Tuesday; now, burning people in the hand at Newgate by the dozen, and now burning pamphlets at the door of

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In the 18th century, even relatively petty crimes were often punished by hanging. It was not unusual for a petty thief or pickpocket to receive as harsh a sentence as would a hardened criminal or murderer.

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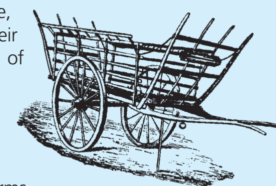

tumbrils — (also **tumbrels**) carts, here, those that transported victims to their death at the guillotine during the Reign of Terror.

turnkeys — prison wardens, so called because they turn the keys in the locks of the cells.

blunderbusses — muzzle-loading firearms.

musketeers — here, police officers armed with muskets, old-fashioned rifles.

St. Giles — a poor neighborhood in London, notorious for the large numbers of thieves who lived there.

contraband — illegal merchandise; often, smuggled goods.

(4) Death is referred to as the Farmer, for the seeds of the violence of a revolution are being nurtured and cultivated in the countryside, where feudalism is still practiced and where nobles live luxuriously in grand manor houses while the masses starve. In addition, the rustic carts evoke the image of the tumbrils that will transport victims of the Reign of Terror to their death. Together, the Woodman and Farmer work toward their, as yet, hidden goals, silently and implacably plotting the end of an era of extravagance and excess. Dickens capitalizes *Fate* and *Death* because he has personified these concepts. Once again, Dickens alerts his generation that the silence of the masses should be taken as an ominous sign. He warns against mistaking silence for complacence.

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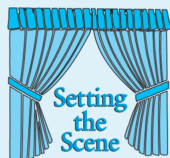
Westminster Hall; to-day, taking the life of an atrocious murderer, and to-morrow of a wretched *pilferer* who had robbed a farmer's boy of sixpence.

All these things, and a thousand like them, came to pass in and close upon the dear old year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Environed* by them, while the Woodman and the Farmer worked unheeded, those two of the large jaws, and those other two of the plain and the fair faces, trod with stir enough, and carried their divine rights with a high hand.* (5) Thus did the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five conduct their Greatnesses, and *myriads* of small creatures — the creatures of this *chronicle* among the rest — along the roads that lay before them.

What does Dickens imply about the monarchy in both countries?

Chapter II
The Mail



Book I sets the stage for the rising action of the novel. As the story begins to unfold, we track the progress of a Dover mail coach, making its way through the murk and mud carrying three secretive passengers. The atmosphere is tense, for neither passengers, coachman, nor guard feels secure, due to the possible presence of highwaymen anywhere along the pitch-black roads. Then, suddenly, through the mist, a mysterious rider approaches in the dark.

Notice the use of language in the last sentence of Chapter 1 and the first sentence of Chapter 2. The transition is seamlessly achieved.

It was the Dover road that lay, on a Friday night late in November, before the first of the persons with whom this history has business. The Dover road lay, as to him,* beyond the Dover mail,* as it lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He walked up hill in the mire by the side of the mail, as the rest of the passengers did; not because they had the least relish for walking exercise, under the circumstances, but because the hill, and the harness, and the mud, and the mail, were all so heavy, that the horses had three times already come to a stop, besides once drawing the coach across the road, with the mutinous intent of taking it back to Blackheath.

With drooping heads and *tremulous* tails, they mashed their way through the thick mud, floundering and stumbling between whiles, as if they were falling to pieces at the larger joints. As often as the driver rested them and brought them to a stand, with a wary "Wo-ho! so-ho- then!" the near leader* violently shook his head and everything upon it — like an unusually *emphatic* horse, denying that the coach could be got up the hill. Whenever the leader made this rattle, the passenger started,* as a nervous passenger might, and was disturbed in mind.

Two other passengers, besides the one, were *plodding* up the hill by the side of the

Who is walking up the hill on the Dover road? Why is he walking?

Why does the passenger "start"?

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

environed — surrounded by.
with a high hand — in an overbearing manner; arrogantly.
as to him — from his perspective.
the Dover mail — a coach carrying both mail and passengers, pulled by four horses, that, at the time, traveled regularly between the coastal town of Dover and the capital city, London.
near leader — here, the left horse in the front pair.
started — moved involuntarily.

(5) Dickens again contrasts the growing unrest and stirrings of revolution with the self-centered ignorance of the monarchy and nobility.

What does Dickens imply about the monarchy in both countries?
A. The monarchs in both countries obviously believe in the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, in which kings and queens are not answerable to the people, but derive their uncontested right to rule from God. Thus, they act with "a high hand," unconcerned with the opinions or feelings of "the small creatures," their subjects. Dickens' epithet, "their Greatnesses," is an example of verbal irony; clearly, he does not believe that either pair of monarchs is worthy of this appellation.

Who is walking up the hill on the Dover road? Why is he walking?
A. The person walking is the first of the many principal characters in the story. He and fellow passengers are walking because the horses cannot pull the heavy load uphill, through the mud.

Why does the passenger "start"?
A. The passenger is ner- vous, and he jumps whenever the lead horse shakes its head violently. It seems that he is agitated, but we are not yet aware of the reason for his concern.

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