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Teaching “a Tale of Two Cities,”

Guide for Curriculum Unit 79.05.02

by John L. Colle

A standard 9th grade prose work taught in New Haven is Charles Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities.” Unfortunately, most attempts in the classroom are unsuccessful for both students and teachers. This unit addresses several questions that relate to the teaching of the novel. What did historians or philosophers during the latter part of the eighteenth-century think of the French Revolution? What did Dickens, himself a Victorian, think of it sixty years after it had occurred? What have critics—Victorian as well as modern—said about the novel? And, finally, what are the best ways to teach such a novel to students who may be reluctant to read any extended prose work? Background on the Revolution begins with a discussion of social philosophy of Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, Thomas Carlyle. To attract students’ interest, specific aspects of court life are also suggested and summarized. The narrative briefly reviews four other “handles” (strategies for teaching): character, narration, plot, and, of course, setting (for many students, the most interesting aspect of this particular novel.) An extensive annotated bibliography follows the narrative.

(Recommended for 9th grade English I students at most reading levels; advanced students should read unabridged editions of the novel.)

Key Words

Dickens Charles Tale Two Cities Literature British Novel

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