
Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities. CD-ROM. Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1999.

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Like many of the recently-released CD-ROMs in literary studies, *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities* offers an exhaustive treatment of the novel and its author. It is a technically impressive resource for the study of Dickens and his text that should be helpful for teachers and students alike. While it will certainly encourage an eager secondary or post-secondary student to continue his/her investigation of the narrative, the CD-ROM will also be useful to teachers, both for out-of-class preparation and in-class practice. Students will enjoy the visual splendor of the dramatization of key scenes, the art gallery, and the virtual tutorials; teachers will appreciate the extensive cross-referencing of the dramatized scenes with the complete text and the extensive background material on Dickens and his corpus. The CD-ROM also offers examples of literary criticism on *A Tale of Two Cities*, analyses of the major characters, timelines and maps of Victorian England, and a lengthy bibliography for further study of the novel, including internet, filmic, and printed sources. *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities* is an entertaining and a fecund resource for the examination of the text and its author, but it devotes far too much attention to the life of the author, leading to a limited and unorganized treatment of the cultural context of the narrative.

The CD-ROM actually combines its material on Dickens' biography with its consideration of Victorian life and society in the section labeled "Dickens: His Life and Works." This structure of the technology reveals its attempt to bury the cultural history of the Victorian world in the experiences and literary productions of Dickens. The CD-ROM provides an impressive chronology juxtaposing Dickens' life with major nineteenth-century literary and political events, but this timetable is notably unconcerned with international happenings, especially the colonial successes and failures of the British empire. In addition, the discussion of Victorian society is poorly ordered. Users must scroll through lengthy text that covers diverse material on mid-nineteenth-century culture; an outline would certainly have bolstered the effectiveness of this resource. There is a commendable treatment of the Victorian caste system, in particular the lower classes, which students will find very informative as they attempt to read the novel against the modernizing economy of Dickens' England. This consideration of class also offers intertextual readings of other Dickensian novels, encouraging students and teachers to draw meaningful connections between *A Tale of Two Cities*, the

novelist's œuvre, and the political culture of the nineteenth century. This area of the menu also includes an art gallery and fascinating maps of London identifying key features of the city. These maps are impressive resources, but additional links to visual representations of the city would have improved their efficacy. The art gallery, likewise, is very entertaining and allows users to develop visual sense of Dickens' world, but the images need additional context, including subject matter and date, for the non-Victorian expert. Art from the French Revolution would also have been a nice addition for this international novel.

The CD-ROM provides a complete text of *A Tale of Two Cities* and provides a good introduction to the cosmopolitan narrative, including an examination of the literary sources of Dickens' work such as the travel literature of Arthur Young. The organizational system of the novel, unlike that of the discussion of Victorian society, is very effective and easy to use. Users can directly access specific chapters of the novel, and there is an especially helpful "Key Events" feature that is organized by chapter. This latter resource allows for a quick review of Dickens' convoluted plot and helps students and teachers recall the many scene shifts of the tale. The final component in this section of the menu offers a treatment of the various themes of the novel. The CD-ROM identifies four major themes: 1) Doubling, 2) Resurrection, 3) Death, and 4) Love and Hate/Home and Prison. While the critical discussions of these themes is uneven at best, the writers continually use specific textual examples to support their claims, and students can click on these quotes to return to the specific section in the novel. This is a tremendous advantage of the CD-ROM technology that will aid students as they learn to engage and respond to specific textual material while building critical arguments. Students may most often use this hypertext at individual workstations, but teachers could also employ this feature in an in-class environment, provided they had access to effective projecting mechanisms.

Teachers may also be able to use the great virtual tutorials in class. Located in the "Literary Criticism" section of the Main Menu, the virtual tutorials offer brief discussions by Dr. Margaret Reynolds and Dr. John Rignall on such key features as the novel's opening paragraph, the importance of Dickens' life to the story, the figure of Madame Defarge, Carton's dilemma, and the curse of Alexandre Manette. The visual graphics of these brief film clips are clear enough for in-class display, and they will help students learn the critical tradition of the novel while illustrating how even Dickensian scholars can develop different ideas about the story. In this area of the CD-ROM, there are also explanations of Marxism, New Historicism, and four essays on *A Tale of Two Cities* by such critics as Melanie Day and Ben Lawrence. The articles do a good job of explaining the relevance of

Marxism and New Historicism to Dickens' novel, but the initial treatments of these critical approaches almost ignore the topic of literature altogether. This section of the CD-ROM may be most helpful to secondary teachers, but post-secondary students will also benefit from the critical context provided by the virtual tutorials and the articles.

Like the virtual tutorials, the dramatizations of key scenes are visually impressive and should be very helpful for the teacher in an in-class setting. The brief film clips allow students to develop clear images of Dickens' story, but perhaps more impressive is the corresponding text that accompanies each dramatization. Students are able to follow the text on one side of the screen as they view the scene on the other. This technology certainly reveals the dramatic quality of Dickens' storytelling and encourages students to pay close attention to the novelist's masterful use of language to develop visual images, specifically images of place and character. The CD-ROM also offers brief character sketches of the major figures in the novel. While this feature may look all-too-much like a page out of Cliffs Notes, the treatments of the characters fill in much information about past connections between the major players in Dickens' plot that often elude students. In addition, there is lengthy bibliography that includes filmic, internet, and print sources. Regrettably, the print-based section is composed entirely of book-length studies. While this long list demonstrates the vast critical tradition associated with Dickens and *A Tale of Two Cities*, articles and chapters would certainly be more helpful for students conducting short-term research. *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities*, like its bibliographic section, is an exhaustive resource for teachers and students; however, it lacks a more organized cultural context for Dickens' literary work. It will, nevertheless, certainly aid students and teachers alike in their exploration and appreciation of the novel.