



# Charles Darnay as a secret double of Charles Dickens in A Tale of Two Cities

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## Charles Darnay as a secret double of Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*

To this day, most Boulogne people treasure the memory of Charles Dickens, gratefully remembering how much he grew to like his “French watering-place”, where he and his family spent many a leisurely holiday in the mid-1850s, often entertaining visitors from England. Because the venue is more precisely Condette, the village south-west of Boulogne with a distinct whiff of the illicit about it – whether it did offer an ideal “love nest” to the Dickens-Ternan couple does not seem to matter – this leg of the conference will interrogate the explanatory power of the adjective “Dickensian” when it is related to such concepts as movement, travel, and a (possibly transgressive) yearning to cross thresholds – a major characteristic of Dickens’s characters as much as of the writer himself, from a very early stage of his career.

With this in mind, papers are invited that address the conference theme, including, but not exclusively, the following topics:

Cross-Channel adventures: “Le citoyen Dickens” in Northern France & Belgium; holidaymaking; guilty secrets, transgressiveness and secrecy; spiritual quest; the restless self: wandering, meandering, separateness; paralysis and entrapment; echoing footsteps; negotiating the Other: the defamiliarized self; Dickens as a leading exponent of Victorian culture across the Channel

Critics have noticed that Charles Darnay and Charles Dickens share more than their Christian name or their initials. Like Charles Dickens Charles Darnay keeps going and coming between England and France on “secret business of which he could give no honest account. *A Tale of Two Cities* <sup>1</sup>p68” “on business of a delicate and difficult nature”p.74. Moreover, his double or hybrid identity as an Anglicised Frenchman and other indications might be looked upon as clues to probing fictional appearances further. Beyond the influence of Coleridge's views of the French Revolution, Charles Dickens's relationship to that major historical event may be related to his own favourite obsessions as they surface in *Barnaby Rudge*, *David Copperfield* or *Edwin Drood*. Charles Darnay can be seen as delineating a slightly more hidden or deeply repressed Dickens.

The ambivalent way the character relates to some of the master signifiers of the French revolution-- its violent transgressiveness in regard to a despotic Law-- and “the unseen force that was drawing him fast to itself like the influence of the Load-stone Rock” may reveal identity features the author not only shared with his character but may have unconsciously or less consciously wished to conceal from himself or from his readers. These items might show the author to be more concerned and have more in common with his character and the core events in which he is involved than perhaps Charles Dickens thought or wished to think. Is Charles Darnay *ci-devant* Marquis de St-Evremonde the double of *le citoyen* Dickens?

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The ambivalent way the character relates to some of the master signifiers of the French revolution-- its violent transgressiveness in regard to a despotic Law and Regicide-- and “the unseen force that was drawing him fast to itself like the influence of the Load-stone Rock” may reveal identity features the author not only shared with his character but may have unconsciously or less consciously wished to conceal from himself or from his readers.

These items might show the author to be more concerned and have more in common with, his character and the core events in which he is involved than perhaps Charles Dickens thought or wished to think. Is Charles Darnay *ci-devant* Marquis de St-Evremonde the double and mask of *le citoyen* Dickens?

*A Tale of Two Cities*. Penguin classics. 1859/2000

## Charles Darnay --an Anglo-French interloper or a French Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*?

That Charles Darnay and Dickens have in common the same initials has often been noticed. The likeness between their initials seems to point to some sort of identification of CD with Charles Darnay or some implication of the writer in the character. If Charles Darnay can be seen as a kind of Charles Dickens' fictional counterpart, it is in reverse. For Charles Darnay was born a Frenchman unlike Charles Dickens who was born His Majesty's subject. Though Charles Dickens made a point of writing and speaking French when in France and occasionally in his letters, he never got immersed in French culture as much as Darnay who has been described as an Anglicized Frenchman and moreover, was the son of an English mother.

How far Charles Darnay is a Frenchman or an Englishman has not often been debated. Charles Dickens himself does not seem to show much concern about that point either; neither about whether being a Frenchman and being Anglicized or English educated were compatible and how far, which is another issue. He does not either seem to devote much thought to the effects of CD's siding with his English mother against a French father who is a murderer and a rapist. Though Charles Darnay acknowledges being French by birth

and by his father's descent, he disowns them and shifts his allegiance to his mother and his mother's country.

This trait defines him as a kind of potentially bipolar personality which is structured around his identifying with his English mother and her native language as much as against his French aristocratic father. Symbolically, he accomplishes a “4<sup>th</sup> August Night” Abolition of all aristocratic privileges by renouncing his noble title and name and family properties. He severs all links to his father and his father's ancestry by adopting his mother's name. By English 19<sup>th</sup> century standards he reduces himself below gentlemanly status and rank by earning a living on teaching French in London. That rupture from all inherited pattern of noble behaviour marks him socially and morally as an opponent to the values and ways by which his father and forefathers used to live. He appears to have made his the gospel of self-help and hard work which came to define the 19<sup>th</sup> century English middle-class to which his mother seems to belong.

However one point that seems to set him off and apart is that he is described by the author as reading “with young men who could find interest for the study of a living language that was spoken all over the world and he cultivated a taste for its store of knowledge and fancy”. P.135 In that respect he can be said to firmly stay French-minded or French cultured and to entertain a kind of deep attachment and a strong link to his native country and to its native folks. “A Frenchman-born” he is as Mr Lorry reminds him and he himself acknowledges himself to be p.242

That bond may be viewed as entering into his resolution to go back to France in order to answer Gabelle's call to succour him in his jail. Other factors may have played a part in urging him toward that fateful step. Charles Dickens describes “the unseen force that was drawing him fast to itself” like the influence of the Load-stone Rock, so that “Everything that arose before his mind, drifted him on, faster and faster... to the terrible attraction.” Part of it rises from a guilty bond to “his own unhappy land” for which he should try to assert the claims of mercy and humanity.”p.252

The masochistic link riveting him to his birth country may derive from Darnay's sympathy with some of the revolutionaries ideals. He himself does mention “his renunciation of his social place” of his own accord, by which he achieved his own 4<sup>th</sup> August Night of abolition of all Aristocratic privileges. He even goes so far as reproaching himself with not making his renunciation of his social rank complete enough, not working it out systematically enough, as though he had not cleansed himself enough of the sin of being an Aristocrat. Yet, he has now shed all references to an aristocratic identity and inheritance. Ironically, that is the very thing Stryver and Lorry strongly rebuked him for, being unaware they are addressing the very St-Evremonde they revile 'for being infected by the most pestilent code of devilry “and” abandoning his property to the vilest scum of the earth”. P.249 Stryver even wonders the nephew of the Marquis is not at the head of the butcherly mob.

Wondering whether he sufficiently broke away from his aristocratic origins is by itself an indication. True or not, it reveals a self-questioning, an interesting uncertainty or oscillation about Charles Darnay. Moreover, he is described by the narrator as being divided. He cannot help “thinking, having had some sympathy for the miserable people, having abandoned something to them,..., that one might be listened to, and might have the power to persuade to some restraint;”p245 Indeed he does dream of being at their head but in order to restrain them, not to urge them onto more abuse or more power.

True, he does not seem to exhibit any manifest republican leanings. His rejection of aristocracy does not go as far as making a political clean sweep of the *Ancien régime*, or raising the issue of the origins of the legitimacy of power. By opting for his mother's

English side Charles Darnay both breaks away from his father and turns towards the English king as an authority who all in all has dealt with him fairly and benignly. Charles Darnay does not allow himself or is not allowed by Charles Dickens to go down to the bottom of the political issue of sovereignty –who of the King or the people is sovereign? . He remains in an in-between area.

On the whole, one could say it is the Frenchman in him who returns to France, as though the force of belonging there was overwhelmingly drawing him to his native country and to the political tragedy taking place there. That sense of belonging springs from his linguistic or cultural roots which his taste for their store of knowledge and fancy testifies to.

As a Frenchman Darnay-St-Evremonde seems to be far more deeply involved in the ongoing historical drama than is manifest. There is the whole knot of violent emotions tying the young man to his French native scene. As Richard Maxwell points out in a note, p.459, Book 2, Ch.5 note 1, CD makes an explicit reference to the doubling between Darnay and Gaspard as parricides. “Both of them arrive at the château on the same day, both have reason to hate Monsieur, but Gaspard does the deed which Darnay cannot or will not.” The critic might have added that looming large in the background was the regicide/parricide of Louis XVI. The murdering of the marquis is equated to a parricide by French justice. The Load-stone Rock that irresistibly draws Charles Darnay to Paris is parricidal guilt, guilt for the impulse to commit the murder of the father, its prohibition/inhibition as well as the attendant compulsive need for self-punishment. The latter –self-punishment-- is particularly prominent here.

That murder is almost overshadowed or occulted by the terrible rape and murder of Mme Defarge's sister and her husband. They constitute a primitive scene which is uncovered and disclosed by an eye witness not of the actual raping and murder but of the traces they left on their racked bodies and through Dr Manette's written testimony. They will be laid to Charles Darnay's charge. He is denounced and indicted as “one of a family of tyrants, one of a race proscribed”, as an oppressor of the people, p.328. So he is held to account for his father and uncle's crimes at the revolutionary tribunal, is convicted and sentenced to death.

In the eyes of the Revolutionary tribunal, the raping and the ensuing murder are viewed as a pretext, motive and justification for the execution of Charles Darnay which is a redoubling and re-enactment of Louis XVI guillotining. The whole institution of monarchical tyranny and its oppression of the people are being identified with Darnay just as they were embodied into the King of France, and destroyed through his being put to death. The Marquis of St-Evremonde is being executed through his son being put to his death. Father and son are joined together and made one through their common ascent and the son's execution.

The Oedipal dimension is made manifest by the son's rebellion against and throw-off of, the father's rule, name and lineage altogether. The sexual stake and meaning of the oedipal relationship to the father is covertly symbolised by the raping and the murdering which have been shifted onto the two brothers/uncle/father. Revolutionary Law does not discriminate between brothers/uncle/father and nephew, confounding them into one persona, the Aristocracy being one with the monarchical institution as archetypal of patriarchy. In conformity to *ancien régime* Law, regicide is equated to parricide. The principle can work both ways to good effect.

As a Frenchman Darnay-St-Evremonde seems to shoulder the heavy burden of multidimensional irrational violence. He bears the brunt of the guilt for the original murder/raping scene, as well as for the Parricidal/regicidal murder in which he has an unconscious share, but above all he is an expiatory victim for his father's crimes. Such is

Charles Darnay's ambiguous identity. Both heir to his forefathers' guilt and their hidden murderer he is part and parcel of the Revolutionary oedipal parricidal gesture, despite what he can do and say to the contrary.

By choosing to side with his English mother against his French sires, Charles Darnay virtually but through no conscious choice of his opted out of the Revolutionary adventure and prevented himself from being an actor in his native country's political destiny, though remaining tied to it through many unseen unconscious links. As he advances on his way to Paris the protective escort he mustered looks more and more like guards watching over a prisoner.

It seems to lie in him to be viewed in equivocal position as a spy or as a go-between, as an interloper, a double-agent or double-crosser, an equivocator regarding to his Majesty the King or the French Republic, ultimately to all established authority. During his trial he is presented as

a false traitor to our serene, illustrious, excellent, and so forth, prince, our Lord the King, by reason of his having on divers occasions, and by divers means, assisted Lewis, the French King, in his wars against our said serene... (65)

by coming and going between the dominions of our said serene, illustrious, excellent, and so forth, and those of the said French Lewis, and wickedly, falsely, traitorously, and otherwise evil-adverbiously, revealing to the said French Lewis what forces our said serene...had in preparation to send to Canada and North America. (66)

The accused never ceased to shuttle back and forth from France to England "on secret business of which he could give no honest account".(68) Moreover, he travels "under an assumed name" "on business of a delicate and difficult nature, which might get people into trouble"(74). Charles Darnay is not safe either from suspicion of wrong-doing from the English Law. His loyalty and faithfulness to the King have been called into doubt by the Judge at the Old Bailey, who summoned him to appear in court under the charge of spying and betraying his Majesty.. His belonging to both cultures and nations seems to lay him open to suspicion of falsehood and treachery to the English King.

Sydney Carton substituting himself for Charles Darnay stands in line with that logic. In the triangular oedipal relationship with father and son standing at one apex and the mother at the third, with Sydney Carton occupying one position—the father or the son's—and Charles Darnay the other.

Until his self-immolation Sydney Carton has been presented through a sado-masochistic relationship with his boss Stryver. One is a Lion the other a Jackal. SC feeds his boss's pleading from his own substance. He can sit up through night and day working at the most desperate causes, he has the knack for assimilating, digesting the hardest cases. Whereas Stryver is fond of displaying his oratorical powers in courting prides himself on being a lion in pleading, being self-complacent and vain Carton wallows in self-contempt and ruminates his failures: "I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man cares for me "p.89 He humiliates himself and lets his boss humiliate him. He trundles to him and lets him trample on his dignity in a self-destructive process which seems to provide him with a perverse kind of enjoyment"

Offering a striking physical likeness to Darnay SC is morally his opposite, being as cynical and bitter as VD is idealistic and generous, just as callously scrupulous as CD is racked or moved by conscience. Quite logically, Darnay is an object of Carton's hatred.

Doubly so as Darnay is his successful rival for Lucy's love. Carton confesses to himself "you hate the fellow"<sup>89</sup>. Nevertheless SC will protest his friendly feelings for CD. "I wish we might be friends"<sup>214</sup>. He makes that statement at the very time when he recalls Darnay forced him to acknowledge he drank. It is an evident case of anger or hatred being reversed to its opposite or turned inward against the self. He'll later beg to be accepted in CD's household as kind of disaffected piece of furniture one forgets about being there. Jealousy and frustration are being reversed to self-hatred and self-contempt, trampling upon one's pride and self-esteem.

Sydney Carton's self-immolation completes the reversal of the hatred-murder relationship to its opposite. In a way he definitely imposes himself as an ideal figure the young couple is beholden to for existing. He sublimises himself into a tutelary figure, a protective aegis ever invisibly present at his side;

The oddity is that though his Anglicized Frenchness brings him into trouble with the King's authority but it does not with the revolutionaries who will lay against him the charge of being a French aristocrat and the son and heir of a hated representative of the French nobility, but not of being the English King's agent. They will not suspect him of plotting against the Republic in the King of England's interest.

For most of the novel, and even eventually, the reader does not know whether Charles Darnay is an English subject or a French citizen, being probably neither. Isn't that where he stands closest to Charles Dickens's heart and mind?

Where does that leave us?

By choice, of name, of moral, social and political allegiance or filiation, Charles Darnay is more than Anglicised, he is definitely an Englishman. Yet fate and a mysterious attraction within him seem to draw him back to France and to get him involved in a relentless conflict with a sadistic Law. He is held to account for the wrongs that his sires committed, unknown to him. An English mother's son, an arch rebel to his French aristocratic father, he is in love with an English-bred French girl whose French father both saves him and causes him to be convicted and sentenced to death.

That leaves us with a character who could be described as one of the few major "hybrid" characters in 19<sup>th</sup> century English novel (the Cooper brothers being the first in line in Ch. Brontë Shirley.) in terms of national identity. Though on surface Charles Darnay looks a thoroughly anglicised personality, in depth we saw that the character was structured around a core of conflicting tendencies and relationships to various master signifiers: the oedipal father figure, the primal scene, parricide and rape, repression. These master signifiers are identifiable with some traits of the French historical Revolutionary scene: the Revolutionary tribunal as social over-self, the Aristocratic father figures, Sex and Violence, Law and the Transgression of Law, Forbidden Desire. They make up his French identity.

That deeper hidden dimension of Charles Darnay as a character is at loggerheads with its anglicised smoother surface. Paradoxically that French identity of the character is what lies closest to Charles Dickens's heart and mind, what moved him with greatest strength and violence. It is part and parcel of the pattern of violent obsessions that run throughout his fiction and keep intruding again and again like Charles the first's head in Mr Dick's mind in David Copperfield. In a way Charles Darnay's French identity is more Charles Dickens' than the anglicized side can be.

