

## Article

# From Shadow to Subject: On the Death and Spiritual Resurrection of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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**Abstract:** In the critical tradition surrounding *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton's sacrifice and resurrection have long been framed within the paradigms of Christian typology or Dickensian humanism. While these readings have their validity, they tend to reduce Carton to a passive vehicle of external forces. This paper argues that Carton's death and resurrection embody a distinctive dialectic of subjectivity, understood in the Hegelian-Kojèvean sense as the capacity for self-realisation through recognition and action in the face of negation. Through a comparative analysis of three modes of resurrection in the novel---Dr. Manette's externally salvaged bodily recovery, Darnay's compromised class-based escape, and Carton's autonomous death as spiritual rebirth---the paper demonstrates that Carton's sacrifice is neither a simple imitation of the Christ narrative nor a mere illustration of the author's moral doctrine. Rather, it is the only path through which an individual, caught in profound spiritual paralysis and self-aware impotence, can achieve subjecthood by actively choosing his own death. Carton's "being-toward-death" transforms him from a "shadow" into a subject of autonomous will. Moreover, his personal redemption objectively breaks the cycle of vengeful violence in the novel and enters into a deep interaction with Dickens's humanist ideals. This paper contends that only by reading Carton as a literary subject who makes his own choices---not as a mouthpiece of ideas---can we fully grasp the enduring artistic power and intellectual depth of this character.

**Keywords:** victorian literature; charles dickens; subjectivity; humanism; resurrection

## 1. Introduction: The Symbolised Carton and His Untold Subjectivity

In Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, few secondary characters have occupied the centre of readers' memory with such intensity as Sydney Carton. The dissipated, alcoholic self-mocking "jackal" who voluntarily walks to the guillotine to replace his rival Charles Darnay performs a transformation that remains as emotionally stunning today as it has been critically elusive since the novel's publication in 1859. Yet in academic interpretation, this transformation is often swiftly incorporated into a set of stable categories that, while illuminating certain aspects of the text, ultimately obscure its most radical dimension [1, 2].

The dominant approach reads Carton as a literary instantiation of the Christ-redemption archetype. In this reading, Carton's substitutionary death---one innocent man dying so that another may live---directly echoes the passion of Christ, and his final vision of a child bearing his name constitutes a promise of immortality beyond physical death. Some interpretations call Carton "the archetype of the scapegoat who willingly sacrifices himself for righteousness and love"; others reinforce this religious-symbolic reading from various angles. Another major line of interpretation sees Carton as the direct embodiment of Dickens's humanism, arguing that his sacrifice demonstrates the ultimate victory of love over hatred [2, 3]. In this view, Carton functions as the author's moral spokesperson, translating abstract humanist ideals into dramatic action.

Both approaches capture important dimensions of the text, yet they share a fundamental limitation: they assume that Carton's agency is wholly subordinate to

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external frameworks—whether divine will, authorial intention, or an abstract moral idea. Within such frameworks, Carton's sacrifice is understood as a ritual enacted through him rather than a choice made by him; his inner struggle, his doubt, his gradual, halting movement toward decision are subordinated to the pre-written script he is presumed to follow. This paper proposes a different reading. It argues that Carton's death is not the enactment of any pre-written script, but the active choice of a man trapped in the grip of extreme spiritual crisis, who seizes the only irreversible action available to him in order to refashion his own value. His resurrection—the metamorphosis from decadence to sublimity, from shadow to subject—does not come from any external pardon or reward, but from his absolute appropriation of his own death. In other words, Carton is great not despite his failure to resemble Christ, but because he chooses to become the master of his own life. To develop this argument, the paper first distinguishes three modes of resurrection in the novel, so as to highlight the uniqueness of Carton's choice; then analyses Carton's existential predicament—*savoir tout, pouvoir rien*—and argues why death becomes his only path to self-realisation; finally, examines how Carton's personal redemption simultaneously enters into a deep interaction with Dickens's humanism and breaks the vicious cycle of vengeful violence in the novel.

## 2. Three Modes of Resurrection: Manette, Darnay and Carton

*A Tale of Two Cities* takes "resurrection" as a central theme, but resurrection is not a singular concept in the novel. Three distinct modes of resurrection can be identified, each carrying unique ethical and narratological implications [3, 4].

### 2.1. Dr. Manette: The Amnesiac Resurrection of the Rescued

Dr. Manette is the first character to undergo "resurrection." After eighteen years of imprisonment in the Bastille, he is released in a state of mental collapse, having forgotten his identity and past, reduced to the compulsive activity of making shoes. Mr. Lorry describes him as "a walking corpse." Manette's recovery depends entirely on external agents: Lucie's patient love, Mr. Lorry's material care, and the erasing and healing power of time itself. In this process, Manette is not required to make any difficult ethical choice—indeed, he does not have to confront the source of his suffering. His resurrection is bought at the price of forgetting: he neither inquires, nor accuses, nor settles accounts; he is simply reassembled into a functioning life. While this mode of resurrection demonstrates the healing power of human compassion, its limitation is equally clear: Manette never truly reconciles with his trauma; he merely evades it within a shelter built by others. His resurrection is passive, dependent, and escapist [5, 6].

### 2.2. Darnay: The Compromised Resurrection of Class Evasion

Charles Darnay's "resurrection" takes a different form. As a member of the aristocratic Evrémonde family, he voluntarily renounces his title and property, emigrates to England, and earns his living as a French teacher [3]. This appears to be an act of moral self-redemption: he tries to gain a new life by breaking with his guilty class identity. On closer inspection, however, Darnay's resurrection is essentially a compromised individual escape—a "conversion" that leaves the structure of Evrémonde exploitation entirely intact—rather than a genuine reckoning with an unjust system. When he returns to France out of a sense of duty, he is immediately arrested and condemned to death because of his family's historical crimes. That he survives at all is entirely due to Carton's substitution—in other words, his resurrection is not earned but donated. Darnay never resolves the ethical dilemma of his identity: he can neither deny his family's guilt nor escape the judgment of history through personal moral self-exemption. His resurrection is incomplete; it preserves the shell of a respectable bourgeois existence while leaving the deep structure of violence untouched.

### 2.3. Carton: The Autonomous Sacrifice from Shadow to Subject

Compared with the above two, Sydney Carton's resurrection is fundamentally different. First, Carton's resurrection depends on no external rescue—on the contrary, it

presupposes the renunciation of any form of bodily salvation. He is not pulled back from death by anyone; he actively walks into death [7]. Second, Carton's resurrection evades nothing: unlike Manette, he does not forget the past; unlike Darnay, he does not flee responsibility through geographical and social relocation. He faces his wasted life, his squandered talent, his unattainable love, with full sobriety—and in that sobriety he makes his choice. Third, Carton's resurrection achieves spiritual transformation through bodily annihilation. He was formerly a "shadow"—Darnay's mirror image, a useless object in the courtroom, a bystander to the woman he loves. In walking toward the guillotine, he becomes for the first time the center of action, an autonomous subject who masters his own fate.

One easily missed but crucial detail: on the scaffold Carton comforts the young seamstress who shares his fate. His calmness and gentleness give courage to the terrified girl. This detail is significant not only because it shows Carton's kindness, but because it marks his complete liberation from his earlier spiritual paralysis—the same drunkard who could not manage his own life is now able to shoulder another's fear. The approach of death does not destroy him; it releases him from decadence. This is precisely the dialectical logic of "being-toward-death": by actively embracing death, Carton wins genuine mastery over his life [2].

#### *2.4. The Essential Differences among the Three Paths*

The differences among the three modes of resurrection can be summarized as follows: Manette's resurrection is salvation by others, bodily, and bought at the price of forgetting; Darnay's is compromised, identity-based, and premised on dependence on another; Carton's is self-salvation, spiritual, and achieved through active sacrifice. Manette is pulled from the grave by others; Darnay is exchanged from the guillotine by Carton; only Carton walks to the grave and simultaneously accomplishes his spiritual rebirth. This comparison reveals the central thesis: Carton's sacrifice is not an act of despairing surrender, but the only action capable of liberating him from the paralyzed state of "knowing yet not waking." His sacrifice is, first of all, not for others, but for himself—so that he can, for once, truly live.

### **3. Predicament and Choice: Why Death Becomes the Only Path to Self-Realisation**

To understand why Carton must go to his death, it is essential to examine the nature of his predicament. Carton's struggle is not rooted in external oppression—he is neither a prisoner nor a poor man, nor is he a social outcast [8]. He is a skilled lawyer, capable of surpassing Stryver as a leading figure in the courtroom. His challenge is entirely internal: a profound spiritual paralysis, a deep-seated doubt about his own worth, and a state of mind characterized by "seeing everything clearly yet being unable to change anything."

#### *3.1. The Life of a Shadow: Self-Knowledge without Self-Action*

Carton's self-description is a litany of self-abasement: "I am a disappointed drudge", "I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me". Yet this self-abasement is grounded in a clear awareness of his own condition. He knows he is wasting his talent, knows that drinking is slow suicide, knows his love for Lucie is hopeless, knows his existence is merely Darnay's "dark mirror". Carton is a self-aware, inwardly tragic talent whose outside does not match his inside. Carton's tragedy lies not in ignorance but in knowing and yet doing nothing. He shares Darnay's face but lacks Darnay's capacity for action; he possesses keener insight than Stryver but cannot translate it into professional ambition. This schism creates a claustrophobic predicament: the clearer he sees his situation, the more powerless he feels to change it, and that powerlessness deepens his self-loathing and his drinking [9].

This predicament has a striking modernity. Unlike classical tragedy, which stages conflict between the hero and external fate, Carton's is an internal, almost existential dilemma: he possesses the form of free will but has lost the strength to exercise it. For Carton, any conventional change—striving to become a good lawyer, wooing Lucie, sobering up—has already been judged futile in his imagination. Not because such actions

are objectively impossible, but because they cannot break through his crystallized self-perception: he is a failure; everything he does will fail. This spiritual paralysis requires an extreme measure to shatter it.

### 3.2. *The Transformative Function of Sacrifice: Making the Most Passive Act the Most Active*

Carton's solution is this: to use one immense, irreversible action to force a re-forging of the self. In this logic, death acquires a radically new meaning. Ordinarily, death is the most passive of events—something that happens to a person, not something one actively chooses. But Carton, by meticulously planning his own sacrifice, turns death into a supremely active act. Every step—exploiting the physical resemblance to substitute for Darnay, infiltrating the prison, reassuring Lucie, comforting the seamstress—displays a calmness, resourcefulness, and responsibility that were entirely absent from the earlier, dissipated lawyer. This judgment reveals that Carton's inner contradiction is not merely a matter of individual character flaw but a widespread spiritual symptom: the coexistence of inertia, self-destructive tendency, and a thirst for meaning. Carton's solution is unique: he uses one absolute act—death—to forcibly end the schism. In the limit situation of death, procrastination is no longer possible, self-deception is no longer possible; he is compelled to become a whole person.

One detail is easily misread: on the eve of his sacrifice Carton says: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." Many critics read this as Christ-like humility and submission. I argue the opposite: this sentence is full of mastery over his own action. Carton is not saying that he has been "chosen" to do a great thing; he is saying that he judges this to be a "far better thing." The comparison is not against a divine standard, but against everything he himself has done before. This is a man giving the final verdict on his own life—and that verdict is pronounced by none other than himself.

### 3.3. *The Philosophical Meaning of "Being-Toward-Death"*

From an existentialist perspective, Carton's sacrifice can be seen as a practice of "being-toward-death." In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that only by confronting the inevitability and inalienability of death can one break free from the fallen state of the "das Man" and achieve authentic existence. This is precisely what happens to Carton. Before walking to the guillotine, his life was inauthentic: he lived in Darnay's shadow, in the mire of self-loathing, and in the anxiety of "what will others think." Death—the death he actively welcomes, the death that is entirely his own—forces him, for the first time, to become fully himself. A metaphorical comparison can be drawn between Carton's sacrifice and the resurrection of Jesus, seeing it as a unification of the individual and the social. This reading has its value, but this paper goes further: Carton's sacrifice has philosophical power precisely because he is not Christ [9, 10]. He has no divine guarantee, no promise of resurrection; he is an ordinary man who, at the end of an ordinary and even failed life, chooses to give meaning to his death. That meaning is conferred by no external authority; it is "won back" through his own choice. This is closer to the modern individual's difficult pursuit of meaning than any religious redemption narrative.

## 4. Personal Redemption and the Social Dimension: Carton's Interaction with Dickens's Humanism

The most obvious effect of Carton's sacrifice in the novel is to preserve Lucie's family happiness. However, reducing it to a mere illustration of altruism oversimplifies its significance. Carton's sacrifice serves a more intricate purpose: it represents both the culmination of his personal awakening and Dickens's imaginative effort to transcend the cycle of social violence. These two dimensions are deeply interconnected, forming a dialectical relationship that enriches the narrative's complexity.

### 4.1. *From Mouthpiece to Dialogue Partner: Rethinking the Author-Character Relationship*

In traditional readings, Carton is often regarded as a "mouthpiece" for Dickens's humanist ideals. This view assumes a one-way street: the author first has an abstract idea

(e.g., "love conquers hatred," "sacrifice brings resurrection") and then creates a character to illustrate it. However, this unidirectional "author→character" model oversimplifies the tension and dialogue that may exist in the creative process.

In fact, Dickens was in a personal crisis while writing *A Tale of Two Cities*—his marriage to Catherine was failing, and his relationship with a young actress was controversial. The projection of the "id" suggests that Carton embodies Dickens's own identification with the "failure," the "scapegoat," and the "misunderstood talent." More importantly, once created, Carton may have influenced Dickens's own understanding of his humanist ideals. Dickens may have initially intended to write a moral fable about the French Revolution, but the character of Carton, once born, acquired a certain autonomy: he is not a perfect hero—he drinks, he is decadent, he is self-loathing—but for that very reason, his sacrifice is far more convincing than any perfect hero's could be. Carton demonstrates something crucial: the power of humanism does not stem from the benevolent largesse of the noble but from the spiritual leap that even the most abject, most failed person can accomplish. In this sense, Carton is not a passive vehicle of Dickens's ideas but a source of meaning that enters into dialogue with the author. The novel compresses an event of immense complexity to the scale of a family history, with a cast of characters that includes an antihero as believably flawed as any in modern fiction [11, 12]. It is precisely Carton's believable flaws—his alcoholism, his self-disgust, his apparent worthlessness—that render his final act of autonomous sacrifice so profoundly moving.

#### 4.2. *Breaking the Cycle of Violence: The Social-Ethical Function of Sacrifice*

*A Tale of Two Cities* presents a suffocating picture of the cycle of violence: the aristocracy oppresses the common people; the common people, in revolution, exact disproportionately cruel revenge on the aristocrats; and revenge breeds new revenge. Madame Defarge is the personification of inexorable hatred—she is never satisfied, and she makes no distinction among individual aristocrats' degrees of guilt. Darnay, though he has renounced his title and property, is arrested because of his family's historical crimes; even the innocent Lucie and little Lucie are drawn into the vortex of revenge.

Against this background, Carton's sacrifice takes on a special significance. First, Carton's sacrifice and Madame Defarge's revenge form the most important binary opposition in the whole novel: on one side, the relentlessly escalating logic of hatred; on the other, the "act of love" that costs a life. Carton does not argue with the logic of revenge—he does not defend himself, does not resist, does not beg; he simply responds to it with an act that lies entirely outside the framework of revenge. His death cuts off the chain of retribution directed at Darnay and at the same time shows the reader a possible way out of the cycle of violence: not by overwhelming the enemy with superior force, but by completely exiting the exchange logic of violence [13]. Carton's sacrifice embodies a transcendence of hatred through forgiveness. However, it must be added: Carton's sacrifice has the power to break the cycle precisely because it is first of all individual. It is not authorized by any class, party, or ideology; it is the autonomous choice of a person who could be seen as an outsider. This individuality immunizes it against being co-opted into the rhetoric of any collective violence, and thus it achieves genuine moral originality. In this respect, Carton stands as an implicit rebuke to Madame Defarge's claim that revolutionary violence serves justice: his sacrifice shows that genuine rupture with the cycle of retribution requires not more violence, but a radical act of individual love that refuses the logic of exchange altogether.

#### 4.3. *From Narrated to Narrating Subject: Carton's Final Transformation*

The final chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities* closes with Carton's interior monologue, including the famous "resurrection" prophecy: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done..." The narratological significance of this ending deserves close attention. The novel is predominantly narrated in the third person omniscient, but the ending suddenly enters Carton's first-person interior monologue. This shift in narrative perspective is not accidental. It marks Carton's transformation from an object of narration into a subject who confers meaning on narration. For most of the novel, Carton is only a

secondary figure, often appearing together with Darnay as his dark mirror or as a supplement to narrative functions. However, at the end, the narrative voice becomes his [7]. Carton finally breaks free from the fate of being a "shadow"; he is no longer merely Darnay's mirror image but emerges as the master of his own story, determining the emotional cadence and moral judgment of the narrative. This is the most compelling evidence of Carton's spiritual resurrection: he transitions from the margins of another's story to the center of his own.

### 5. Conclusion: Carton's Legacy for the Modern Reader

Sydney Carton's character has undergone many reinterpretations over nearly two centuries of reception, yet one core intuition has remained unshaken: this figure touches something deeper than the plot of the novel itself. This paper has argued that this "something deeper" is neither an illustration of Christian redemption nor a piece of Victorian humanist oratory, but a narrative about how subjecthood can be reborn in an extreme predicament.

Carton's predicament—the split between talent and agency, clear awareness of one's condition coupled with powerlessness to change it, internalized self-negation produced by comparison—is all too familiar to today's readers. In a world saturated with competition, judgment, and comparison, many have felt, to some degree, what it means to "live as someone else's shadow." Carton's answer is not an uplifting success-story formula, but an extreme and unsettling revelation: sometimes, a person can truly possess himself only by losing everything. This is not a glorification of death, but an exposure of a paradox—when conventional change is no longer possible, when spiritual paralysis has congealed, the only thing that can shatter it is one absolute, irreversible, utterly self-owned action. Carton's sacrifice is powerful not because it is morally "right," but because it is one final, most complete exercise of free will under limit conditions.

Future research may explore a comparative genealogy of Carton alongside other "being-toward-death" figures—Kirillov in Dostoevsky's *Demons*, Sisyphus in Camus—as well as the contemporary ethical relevance of this figure. But wherever research goes, one thing is certain: Sydney Carton is not merely a character created by Dickens; he is a presence that keeps stepping out of the text and asks every reader of every era: when you too are trapped in spiritual paralysis, do you have the courage to use one act to redefine your entire life?

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