French Revolution – Social Conditions
Teacher Page

Overview: The goal of this activity is to reinforce the students understanding of the social conditions that set the stage for the French Revolution and the extreme violence into which it descended.

Objectives: Students will be able to:
- interpret a literary source for issues of point of view, setting and characterization.
- identify and describe the social conditions that existed at the time of the Revolution.
- analyze a literary source for historical content.

Strategies: Students will read the excerpt from Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities and will complete the accompanying worksheet. Following the completion of the worksheet students will imagine that several years have passed and that the father of the murdered child is now a revolutionary activist. Write a speech that the father might give to a crowd of poor Parisians to persuade them to take up the revolutionary cause. Students should use the incident described in the excerpt, information regarding issues of social class from the PowerPoint and their imaginations to create a compelling and convincing speech.

Alternate Activity: Students will write a diary entry as if they were a witness in the crowd describing the incident and how it reflects the social conditions suffered by the poor of Paris prior to the Revolution.

Closing: The teacher will ask volunteers to share their work with the class.
In the following excerpt from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, a powerful and wealthy nobleman travels at high speed through the streets of Paris in his carriage with no regard for the poor working people who must leap out of his way. The incident takes place several years before the French Revolution is underway.

With a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration not easy to be understood in these days, the carriage dashed through the streets and swept around corners, with women screaming before it, and men clutching each other and clutching children out of its way. At last swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt, and there was a loud cry from a number of voices, and the horses reared and plunged.

But for the latter inconvenience, the carriage probably would not have stopped; carriages were often known to drive on, and leave their wounded behind, and why not? But, the frightened valet had got down in a hurry, and there were twenty hands at the horses’ bridles.

‘What has gone wrong?’ said Monsieur, calmly looking out.

A tall man in a nightcap had caught up a bundle from among the feet of the horses, and had laid it on the base of the fountain, and was down in the mud and wet, howling over it like a wild animal.

‘Pardon, Monsieur the Marquis!’ said a ragged and submissive man, ‘it is a child.’

‘Why does he make that abominable noise? Is it his child?’

‘Excuse me, Monsieur the Marquis – it is a pity – yes.’

The fountain was a little removed; for the street opened, where it was, into a space some ten or twelve yards square. As the tall man suddenly got up from the ground, and came a running at the carriage, Monsieur the Marquis clapped his hand for an instant on his sword hilt.

‘Killed!’ shrieked the man, in wild desperation, extending both arms at their length above his head, and staring at him. ‘Dead!’

The people closed round, and looked at Monsieur the Marquis. There was nothing revealed by the many eyes that looked at him but watchfulness and eagerness; there was no visible menacing or anger. Neither did the people say anything; after the first cry they had been silent, and they remained so. The voice of the submissive man who had spoken, was flat and tame in its extreme submission. Monsieur the Marquis ran his eyes over them all, as if they had been mere rats come out of their holes.

He took out his purse.

‘It is extraordinary to me,’ said he, ‘that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is forever in the way. How do I know what injury you have done my horses? See! Give him that.’

He threw out a gold coin for the valet to pick up, and all the heads craned forward that all the eyes might look down at it as it fell. The tall man called out again with a most unearthly cry, ‘Dead!’
The French Revolution – Social Conditions: *A Tale of Two Cities* Worksheet

1. Using a dictionary, look up and define the following words: *valet, monsieur, marquis, submissive.*

2. Identify and describe the main characters in this scene.

3. Using at least four adjectives, describe the attitude of Monsieur the Marquis towards the people on the street.

4. Explain why Dickens chose not to give a name to the father of the murdered child.

5. Explain the reaction of the people on the street to the death of the child. Why do you think they behave the way they do?

6. How might Dickens use this incident foreshadow the extreme violence of The Terror?
The French Revolution – Social Conditions: A Tale of Two Cities Worksheet Teacher Page

1. Using a dictionary, look up and define the following words: valet, monsieur, marquis, submissive.

   *valet – a personal man servant*
   *monsieur – sir*
   *marquis – a title of honor in some European countries*
   *submissive – ready to submit without resistance, humble, obedient*

2. Identify and describe the main characters in this scene.

   *Answers will vary for the following characters: Monsieur the Marquis, the “submissive man, the valet, the father of the killed child”*

3. Using at least four adjectives, describe the attitude of Monsieur the Marquis towards the people on the street.

   *Answers will vary*

4. Explain why Dickens chose not to give a name to the father of the murdered child.

   *The father is so unimportant that he remains without an identity reflecting the lowly status of the poor.*

5. Explain the reaction of the people on the street to the death of the child. Why do you think they behave the way they do?

   *They are silent, submissive, and too beaten down and oppressed to express any anger.*

6. How might Dickens use this incident foreshadow the extreme violence of The Terror?

   *The Marquis is so cruel and cold toward the people and his and his crime is so dreadful.*