

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CHARLES DICKENS

(1812-1870)

Works (novels)

Pickwick Papers. 1836
Oliver Twist. 1837
Nicholas Nickleby 1838
Old Curiosity Shop. 1840
Barnaby Rudge. 1841
Martin Chuzzlewit. 1843
*Dombey and Sons*1846
David Copperfield. 1849
Bleak House. 1852
Hard Times. 1854
*Little Dorritt.*1855
A Tale of Two Cities. 1859
Great Expectations. 1860
Our Mutual Friend. 1864
The Mystery of Edwin Drood. 1870

Biography

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, in Portsmouth, England; the second of eight children. His father was a pay clerk in the navy, and when Charles was twelve the family moved to London. Charles himself was left to live alone for some time, at this point, while the rest of the family moved to be nearer the father, who had gone into debtors' prison. Charles himself started factory work at this time, employed in a blacking, or shoe polish, firm. Dickens' awareness of the roughness of labor stems from that experience, which warmed his sympathies for working class people.

In the subsequent years Dickens had a few periods of schooling, then got a job as a freelance reporter in the law courts. By 1832 he had become a reporter for two London newspapers. On the strength of his growing success as a journalist, he married; he would eventually have ten children by Catherine Hogarth.

Dickens first found true popularity with his episodic novel *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836-7, which like much of his subsequent work was published first in periodical form. Dickens was by this time as popular in America as in England, and in 1842 he made a lecture tour of America, where he criticized the Americans' cultural crudity as well as the nightmare of slavery.

Dombey and Sons (1846) can be taken to mark a maturing stage in Dickens' fiction: a scrutiny of business practices, this novel reaches deeply into the new industrial culture of Britain. *David Copperfield*, 1849, seals the high popularity now awaiting each new serialized work of Dickens.

In the master novels of the 1850's, when Dickens' father and one of his daughters died, the writer gave his most comprehensive fictional pictures of the whole character of his society. *Bleak House* (1852) views the inter-involved network of a new industrial society, in all the darkness of its inner workings. In *Hard Times* Dickens takes us into the implications of economic expansion, in the new hard world.

With *Great Expectations* (1861) Dickens shows that, even near the end of his career (and life) he was able to perfect themes he had been working on: in this case, the theme of the *Bildungsroman*, the moral

growth of a young man from youth to adulthood. Dickens, who was to die a decade later, was retracing the outset of his own life journey.

Achievements

Social reform. From his earliest experiences, working in a 'shoe blacking factory' in London, Dickens was highly sensitive to the workingman's world, with its hardships and lack of privilege. He was fully aware of the problems of infrastructure, security, and health, in this new world, and he devoted much of his fictional thought to critiquing and rethinking this dreadful social setting.

Understanding of childhood. In books like *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Oliver Twist*, Dickens sheds an understanding light on the problems of the children of the underclasses, in the new Industrial society of mid-19th century England. In this way Dickens did a lot to awaken social consciousness, and to promote any number of reform movements, dedicated to the betterment of the condition of underprivileged youth and young children.

Whimsy; eccentric characters. Dickens introduced into fiction a new fascination with the eccentric—lovable or sinister—character, whose distinctive traits served as trademarks for the person. From Mr. Pickwick to Fagin, Dickens knows how to nail individual foibles and peculiar traits which define the character. English fiction, ever since, has been distinctive for its vivid and original characterization.

Comprehensiveness of vision. Like Balzac, in his *Comédie humaine*, Dickens grasps the individual in his whole setting, historical as well as sociological. He achieves this by his own powerful imagination, but also through putting to work his own experience as a teen age laborer among career workingmen. Though Dickens was to become a world traveler, and to rub elbows with the great, he never forgot the whole fabric of society, which was woven from the bottom up.

Themes

Struggle. Take the life paths of *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, or Pip: all of them struggle either with youthful poverty or with harsh turns of fate. These individual tales are replicated throughout Dickens' opus, in which life is invariably down to earth and difficult, and in which individuals must struggle with the law (*Bleak House*), revolution (*A Tale of Two Cities*), or industrial bleakness (*Hard Times*) simply to survive.

Labor. David Copperfield, Pip, and Oliver are all forced to labor heavily as children, to put up with indifferent parents, and to work under foul conditions in a labor market with virtually no provisions for worker safety or compensation. The larger world—*Bleak House*, *Dombey and Sons*, *Barnaby Rudge*—is all about labor as it intersects with commerce, business, the law. To live in industrial society is rarely—according to Dickens—to relax or enjoy.

Humor. Humor in Dickens is upper class and whimsical rather than up-roarious, and it is at its best in works like *The Pickwick Papers*, where it takes the form of self-conscious social wit. Mr. Pickwick, himself a bundle of fussy eccentricities, is naturally alerted to such mannerisms—of dress, of speech, of ritualized behavior—and relates to other 'types' from the comfort of a social perspective which is settled. The poor, who abound in Dickens' work, are less likely than the comfortable, to enjoy the privileges of humor.

Love. In certain texts, like *A Christmas Carol* (1843) Dickens boldly addresses the nature and importance of love. (Dickens is more often, in fact constantly, concerned with affection, fondness, or attention, than with love.) Scrooge is forced, by the fear of death imported by Marley's ghost, to consider his solidarity with others. He recognizes a tie of love that binds him to Bob Cratchit and his family. But though love occupies its place in Dickens' work, it is only very loosely a Christian or other transcendent love, which Dickens experienced through the Church of England, and deplored.

Characters

Charles Dickens is renowned for his eccentric characters, his eye for the odd or tweaked, and his closeness to the character-generating fabric of Industrial Revolution British society. There are many elements to this Dickensian character-creating gift: a superb ear for street or professional language; an eye for unique details—the way a character dresses, eats, walks; the smell, look, or feel of the weather.

Oliver and **Pip**, in Dickens' two masterpieces about rags to riches London youth, show us Dickensian characters at their least eccentric, at their most representative of the ideals—of energy, progress, industriousness—which Dickens himself espoused. We might say that these innocent, but fast learning, lads represent the instructive growing forces *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* are about.

Pickwick, **Fagin**, **Scrooge**, and **Estella** are all unique and unforgettable, character as far as possible from the representative or universal. How can you replicate Pickwick? You would need to fuse, in your imagination, a respectable but puckish retired businessman, at all times chivalric toward the ladies, but often inept at 'dealing with them,' who founds a discussion club, the Pickwick Club, devoted to reports on excursions into the British countryside. Then you would need to season this improbable and charming figure with a childlike innocence which only the childlike is us can create!

Fagin the Jew is Oliver's portal into big city streetwise existence, the actions of pick pocketing, the attitude of screw-you society. Funny, cynical, money gouging, earthy of speech, and in the end, when facing death by hanging, inexplicably moving, for some pepper of humanity. Unique.

Scrooge has become a universal symbol of stinginess, but the symbol is made up of mumbled curses, nasty ripostes, scornful looks, and terrified nightmares; the cocktail is inimitable!

Estella is arguably the most improbable—and effective—of Dickens' women. When we first meet her, at Miss Havisham's, she is already a young teen age minx with a taste for sadistic boyplay. She wheedles Pip into a kiss only to dance away from him, mockingly. Her trademark nasty sexuality in itself forms a leitmotif with which to track Pip's development into the adult world.