

# PICKWICK PAPERS

Charles Dickens

**Overview** An episodic novel—the first novel by Charles Dickens—published in serial form in 1836-7, and in book form in 1837. Dickens had become popular through his *Sketches by Boz*(1816), which were a series of sketches of London life, with strong emphasis on character portrayal. The kind of sociological-ironic tone of the present novel, part journalism and part work in the great tradition of the novel, shows the overwhelming passion of Dickens for **social character analysis**. The powerful portraits to come—in *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, or *Oliver Twist*—are heralded in *The Pickwick Papers*.

**Story** Mr. Samuel Pickwick is the organizing principle of this episodic novel which tracks some of the adventures of its protagonist. Samuel Pickwick is not a dominating figure, but rather a spirited enthusiast (in the spirit of his time) for the English countryside and country ways, a sentimentalist, and a compassionate appreciator of the eccentricities and local colorings of the English people. Not only is Pickwick wealthy, but he is ‘administrative,’ for it is he who enlists three of his friends to join him on coach jaunts throughout the English countryside. In appearance and manner Pickwick is, like all Dickens’ characters, a broad caricature: the man ‘who had agitated the scientific world with his Theory of Tittlebats,’ an amateur naturalist picking up, as were many in the times of Wordsworth, privileged amateurism, and the thoughts of Charles Darwin.

Travelling throughout England by coach, stopping at Inns for the night, Pickwick is in constant touch with what seems to him the most agreeable face of his land. Himself a comic figure, Pickwick is drawn to his like: to such as Alfred Jingle, who joins the troupe in Chapter Two, and turns out to be a kind of slapstick villain, who constantly gets the travelers into trouble; to such as Sam Weller who, entering the book in Chapter Ten, becomes a personal servant to Mr. Pickwick, and uses his cockney wit as a constant counterpoint to the innocent amateurism of his boss. On another occasion, Mr. Pickwick is forced (quite haplessly) to go before the court, to defend himself against a lawsuit brought against him by his landlady, for breach of promise: a wrangle of legal details settles around Pickwick, and gives Dickens a perfect platform on which to build one of his dearest social critiques, against the obscurity and inequality of the court system. As his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* shows us Dickens at work already in between his two master literary powers: antiquated and charming humor, on the one side, and on the other a comprehensive and ever more penetrating power of criticizing man in his social institutions—law, welfare, and poverty.

The most powerful episode in *The Pickwick Papers* presents itself in connection with the lawsuit brought against Pickwick by his landlady. This challenge to Pickwick drives him off his perch of humor, and forces his reader to follow him, Pickwick, into the cells of Fleet Prison—a ‘notorious’ prison, built in the late twelfth century, which though updated and burned down through the centuries, still dominated part of the London skyline in Dickens’ day, and ‘connote[d] all that was mediaeval and cruel’ about the British punishment system, especially as regarded the fate of debtors. Mr. Pickwick is an antiquarian, and a member of the social establishment, but he is appalled by the conditions he finds in the ancient prison, and in haunting scenes, which though different might make us think of Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib, Pickwick takes us with him down filthy dark halls, and past the clanking of archaic iron doors.

The gracious country world traversed by Pickwick and friends in their coach, while fragrant and amusing, is, Dickens says, the other side of a world of injustice and forgotten people. Dickens is far from Karl Marx—his near contemporary—in Dickens’ ultimately dark fictions of human injustice, but like Marx he is deeply appalled by the inherent inequalities of society.

## Themes

**Character** 18th and 19th century western artists and thinkers were fascinated with character, the distinctiveness of the person, what Goethe describes as the immaculate evanescence of the human personality, as we observe it on a fine face. Dickens is a shrewd observer of a Cockney wide-mouth, of his futsy and good humored master, and of the every day Innkeeper, whom Dickens, like Chaucer before him, can pin to the drawing board in perfect detail.

**Whimsy** Dickens, like so many of his contemporary British novelists—Thackeray, Eliot, Austen—is socially astute, attuned to the gentle ironies, subtle questionings, and coy authorial self-reflections that emerge from a still coherent society, only just popping its head through the heavy curtains to spot the industrialization of the landscape.

### Characters

**Samuel Pickwick** is a man of wealth-bred taste, who enjoys the whimsy, gentle sociability, and artistic design of the English countryside. He is not a snob, but he is a gentleman taken by Terence's motto, *homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto, I am human and nothing human is foreign to me*. When it comes to the depths of injustice, as at Fleet Prison, Dickens can 'go there,' and make his voice heard.

### MAIN CHARACTER

**SAMUEL PICKWICK** (Agreeable)

**Character** Mr. Samuel Pickwick is the organizing principle of this episodic novel. He is not a dominating figure, but rather a spirited enthusiast for the English countryside and country ways, a sentimentalist, and a compassionate appreciator of the eccentricities and local colorings of the English people. Not only is Pickwick wealthy, but he is 'administrative,' for it is he who enlists three of his friends to join him on coach jaunts throughout the English countryside. In appearance and manner Pickwick is, like all Dickens' characters, a broad caricature: the man 'who had agitated the scientific world with his Theory of Tittlebats.'

**Parallels** British literature abounds in quirky, bemused characters, whose essence is distilled in Mr. Samuel Pickwick. A classic example, perhaps more robustly hilarious than bemused, is Falstaff, who appears in four Shakespeare plays, notably in *Henry IV, Parts I and II* (1597). For truly bemused, one might turn to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes' right hand man in penetrating mysteries; Watson is only slightly behind Holmes himself, in intuiting solutions, yet forever emits a kind of professorial 'egad' at the brilliance of his master; for an ironic perfect servant, brilliant, tic-ridden and jovial, look no further than P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves, in the series of novels begun in 1915.

### Illustrative moments

**Grandiloquent** Pickwick's initial speech to the members of the Pickwick club, is presented with classical grandeur. 'The eloquent Pickwick, with one hand gracefully concealed behind his coat-tails, and the other waving in air to assist his glowing declamation...' In the fashion of Royal Academicians, and the new societies of learning in Britain at the time, Pickwick celebrates his own scientific ardor, and the desire of members of his new society—four of them—to extend learning and to help mankind. Pickwick refuses to deny that he too, like all humans, has earthly passions, but insists that his better instinct is always to serve.

**Open** We issue directly into the spirit of Mr. Pickwick as a new workday begins. 'Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers, threw open his chamber windows, and looked out upon the world beneath.' He is a man ready for and pleased with the world around him. His mind dwells for a moment on the scene right outside his lodgings, then skips rapidly to the wider world he wants to investigate. 'With his telescope in his great-coat pocket, and his note book in his waistcoat,' he headed into the city for a cab, and started on a day of science and antiquities.

**Romantic** Mr. Pickwick lives in simple but well managed boarding quarters, with his landlady and her son, and one large man who occupied a 'dwarfish French bedstead in the back parlor.' Pickwick begins to make his proposal to the (not really startled) Mrs. Bardwell, who thereupon faints in his arms. Pickwick's confusion is doubled by a sudden intervention; the three other members of the Pickwick Club, coming up the back stairs to visit him. The romantic world thus vanishes, doubly forgotten at the arrival of Sam Weller, the character whose full-figured comic joking opens this text into a developed modern novel.

**Romantic** Mr. Pickwick is at his happiest when he is exploring nature—which to him and his group means the peopled and picturesque landscape of rural Britain. On a typical occasion, Pickwick 'leant over the balustrades of Rochester Bridge, contemplating nature and waiting for breakfast.' He meditates on the ruined walls before him, covered with ancient vegetation, and with the richness of battles fought and lives lived. Then his eyes and imagination extend further, out onto the farm lands on either sides of the Medway—here and there an old church or a windmill. His soul is deeply nourished.

#### **Discussion questions**

What is Dickens' own attitude toward Mr. Pickwick? Does Dickens find Pickwick a 'loveable eccentric,' or an 'old fool'? Does Dickens appear to identify with this character?

What is the meaning of local history for Mr. Pickwick? Are the history and nature Pickwick values soft or hard? Are they byproducts of social values?

Is there a strong social critique embedded in *The Pickwick Papers*? How does Mr. Pickwick react to spending three months in jail?