

The life and legacy of Charles Dickens

The twelve-year-old boy was miserably alone. His father had been placed in prison for failing to pay his debts. As was the custom in England at that time, the rest of the man's family could—and did—live there with him. All except the boy. Instead, he worked at a blacking factory. From morning till night, he pasted labels on bottles in a grim, rat-infested warehouse. He saw his family only at mealtimes. At night he crept off to the slums to sleep.

This episode could easily have come from one of the many novels of Charles Dickens. Instead, it is an episode from Dickens' own dramatic life story.

Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsmouth, England, the second child of John and Elizabeth Dickens. John Dickens supported his wife and eight children by working as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. However, he was continually in debt. Elizabeth tried to help by teaching, but when it came to money, she was no more practical than her husband. Money problems, as well as John Dickens' transfers, kept the family on the move.

Despite the family's financial problems, young Dickens was quite happy for a time. He eagerly devoured the classics in his father's collection of books, contentedly went to school, and even attended some plays.

This pleasant period ended all too soon for Dickens when the family moved to London. His parents were forced to take him out of school to save expenses. Soon after, a relative offered him the job at the factory. Dickens never forgot the five months of neglect, shame, and misery he endured there. Later in his novels, he would movingly describe the fate of similarly distressed "orphans."

At last release came for both Dickens and his family. A legacy from Charles' grandmother allowed the family to pay off debts. Freed from the warehouse, Dickens attended a private school for three years. But his father's debts mounted again, and Charles was forced back to work. This time he found a job as an office boy for an attorney. The experience gave him a close and disillusioning look at the law.

The ambitious and ever-curious Dickens soon moved up. After teaching himself shorthand, he landed a job as a court reporter. He did not find the work exciting enough, so he decided to try to become an actor. However, for one reason or another, his auditions were postponed.

While waiting for the auditions, Dickens took jobs reporting for two newspapers: *The True Son* and *The Mirror of Parliament*. Dickens' experiences as a reporter sharpened his observations of London life and people in general. As a Parliament observer, he also developed a growing awareness of the ills of the time. He could not help but note that the lawmakers'

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efforts to improve the lives of the masses seemed frustratingly slow. Later Dickens would again and again plead in his novels for government reform and social improvement.

Dickens soon moved from newspaper reporting to storytelling. In 1833 his first short story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," was published (though he was not paid or listed as author). More newspaper sketches and short stories followed. Dickens' reputation as a fascinating storyteller grew.

On Charles' twenty-fourth birthday, his first book—a collection of his articles written for the *Evening Chronicle*—was published. *Sketches by Boz* (the Boz nickname coming from his brother's attempt to say "Moses" while he had a cold) was highly praised. But Dickens' real break came when he was asked to write magazine tales to supplement some drawings. These comic tales, compiled as the novel *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836, became wildly popular and won Dickens international fame.

Also at twenty-four, Charles wed Catherine Hogarth, daughter of the *Evening Chronicle* editor. "Kate's" sister Mary lived with the couple from the start of their marriage. After Mary's death in 1837, another sister, Georgina, took Mary's place. Dickens idealized and perhaps even fell in love with both of these sisters. However, his relations with Kate were not as happy. After twenty-two years and ten children, the couple separated in 1858.

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The separation resulted partly because of Dickens' frenzied work schedule. Dickens was by nature a slow writer. Yet he worked so hard that book after book (most first published in serial form) tumbled from his pen. Remarkably, many of these books are classics. Just in the five years following the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens produced five strong novels: *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Barnaby Rudge*.

In 1842 Charles felt overworked and wanted to take a year off. He acted on his impulse to visit America to see democracy in action. There he was treated like royalty. However, he grew tired of the demands for autographs and appearances. Moreover, he disapproved of American slavery and the fact that Americans published his books without permission or payment. His travel book *American Notes* and novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* reflected his disapproval and caused an uproar in America. Dickens later restored good relations on a second tour of the country.

In the 1840s Dickens turned out five Christmas tales. The most famous of these, *A Christmas Carol*, appeared in 1843. Dickens published the work himself when his publishers expressed doubts that it would sell well. They shouldn't have doubted. The story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the Cratchits, and Tiny Tim became an undying favorite. It is still frequently reborn in stage productions and movies.

The 1840s also showed Dickens writing in a grimmer mood—a tendency which increased as he aged. In *Domeby and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens turned to bitter satire. The works were filled with Dickens' criticisms of the legal system, the treatment of the poor, materialism and snobbery, and bureaucracy.

Dickens also wrote other less easily classified novels. Among these books, *David Copperfield* is of special interest since it is largely autobiographical (though there are parts of Dickens' personal experiences in most of his books). Other miscellaneous works include *A Tale of Two Cities*, a romance set during the French Revolution; *Great Expectations*, a cautionary coming-of-age story; and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a murder tale Dickens was working on when he died.

While producing novels at a steady rate, Dickens still spared time to set up and edit two weekly magazines. He also pursued his love of acting by managing a theatrical company and sometimes appearing in plays. He performed in another sense by giving public readings of his work. In addition, Dickens devoted time, energy, and money to several charities. He also enjoyed long walks (on which he gathered more material for his novels), horseback riding, charades, magic, and traveling.

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As busy and successful as he was, Dickens clearly felt the lack of a loving companion. He even sought out Maria Beadnell, a woman he had courted as a penniless young man. But the lovely girl he remembered had become stout and silly.

Dickens finally seemed to find satisfying companionship with a young actress, Ellen Ternan, though at first Ternan seemed reluctant to accept Dickens' love. Dickens later strongly denied rumors of an affair with Ternan. However, she went with him on a few trips and appeared in his will.

By 1865 Dickens' demanding work schedule—particularly the public readings—had begun to affect his health. In 1870 he died of a stroke.

Dickens was one of the most popular writers of his day—indeed, of all time. Today some criticize his overly sentimental and dramatic tone, rambling plots, and exaggerated characters. Yet there are many who praise him for his inventiveness, memorable and engaging characters, grand comedy, and rich style. Perhaps Dickens' greatest strength was his ability to create colorful pictures of London people and life. He vividly preserved the horror, energy, and beauty of the Victorian era for all time.

So what happened to the poor young boy? He grew into manhood and became rich and famous. One day he heard that an elegant house called Gad's Hill Place was for sale. The house was special to him because his father had once pointed it out to him. His father said that with hard work and success, the boy might live there someday. The prediction came true, for the once-miserable factory worker bought the lovely house and lived there until his death.

