



## ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS

Adapted from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Dickens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens)

**Charles John Huffam Dickens** (February 7, 1812–June 9, 1870), pen-name "Boz", was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian era, and one of the most popular of all time. He created some of literature's most memorable characters. His novels and short stories, usually with a theme of the pressing need for social reform, have never gone out of print.



Much of his work first appeared in periodicals and magazines in serialized form, a favored way of publishing fiction at the time. Other writers of the time would complete entire novels before serial publication commenced, but Dickens often wrote his in parts, in the order in which they were meant to appear. The practice lent his stories a particular rhythm, punctuated by one cliffhanger after another to keep the public eager for the next installment. Critics and fellow-novelists such as George Gissing and G. K. Chesterton have applauded Dickens for his mastery of prose, and for his teeming gallery of unique characters, many of whom have acquired iconic status in the English-speaking world. Others such as Henry James and Virginia Woolf have accused him of sentimentality and implausibility.

As a child, Dickens read voraciously, with a particular fondness for the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. He talked, later in life, of his extremely poignant memories of childhood, and of his photographic memory of the people and events that helped to bring his fiction to life. His family's early, moderate wealth came to an abrupt end when his father spent beyond his means and was imprisoned at Marshalsea debtor's prison. The prison provided the setting of one of his works, *Little Dorrit*, where the title character's father is imprisoned.

12-year-old Dickens began working ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse. One of the boys he worked with was named Bob Fagin, a name Dickens later used in *Oliver Twist*. He earned six shillings a week pasting labels on jars of thick shoe polish, which paid for his lodgings and helped support his family. He eventually immortalized his landlady, "with a few alterations and embellishments", as Mrs. Pipchin, in *Dombey & Son*. Later, lodgings were found for him in a "back-attic...at the house of an insolvent-court agent, who lived in Lant Street in The Borough...he was a fat, good-natured, kind old gentleman...lame, with a quiet old wife; and he had a very innocent grown-up son, who was lame too"; these three were the inspiration for the Garland family in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

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The conditions under which working-class people lived became a theme in his works, and it was this unhappy period in his youth to which he alluded in his favorite, and most autobiographical, novel, *David Copperfield*: "I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support, of any kind, from anyone, that I can call to mind, as I hope to go to heaven!"

At 15, Dickens began work as a junior clerk in a law office. He left to become a freelance journalist, reporting legal proceedings. This education informed works such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, and especially *Bleak House*—whose vivid portrayal of the endless machinations, lethal maneuverings, and strangling bureaucracy of the legal system of mid-19th-century Britain did much to enlighten the general public, and was a vehicle for dissemination of Dickens's own views regarding, particularly, the injustice of chronic exploitation of the poor forced by circumstances to "go to Law".

In 1833, when he was 21, Dickens' first fiction story was published, and soon after he became a political journalist, creating sketches which appeared in periodicals. These formed his first collection of pieces—*Sketches by Boz*—which was published in 1836 and led to the serialization of his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens's keen perceptivity, intimate knowledge and understanding of people, and tale-spinning genius would quickly gain him world renown and wealth.

### **Dickensian Characters**

Dickens is famed for many things—his depiction of the hardships of the working class, his intricate plots, his sense of humor. But he is perhaps most famed for the characters he created. His novels were heralded early in his career for their ability to capture the everyday man on paper and create memorable characters to whom readers could relate. Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster, said that Dickens made "characters real existences, not by describing them but by letting them describe themselves."

Dickensian characters—and their typically whimsical names—are among the most memorable in English literature. The likes of Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Jacob Marley, Bob Cratchit, Oliver Twist, The Artful Dodger, Fagin, Bill Sikes, Pip, Miss Havisham, Charles Darnay, David Copperfield, Mr. Micawber, Abel Magwitch, Daniel Quilp, Samuel Pickwick, Wackford Squeers, Uriah Heep and many others are so well known and can be believed to be living a life outside the novels that their stories have been continued by other authors.

Often these characters were based on people that he knew. In a few instances Dickens based the character too closely on the original and got into trouble, as in the case of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*, based on Leigh Hunt, and Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*, based on his wife's dwarf chiropodist. These are not over-dramatized caricatures, but believable people we might see walking down the street. The author, Virginia Woolf, maintained that "we remodel our psychological geography when we read Dickens" as he produces "characters who exist not in detail, not accurately or exactly, but abundantly in a cluster of wild yet extraordinarily revealing remarks."

## **Social Concerns**

At a time when Britain was the major economic and political power of the world, Dickens highlighted the life of the forgotten poor and disadvantaged at the heart of empire. Through his journalism he campaigned on specific issues—such as sanitation and the workhouse—but his fiction probably demonstrated its greatest prowess in changing public opinion in regard to class inequalities. He often depicted the exploitation and repression of the poor and condemned the public officials and institutions that not only allowed such abuses to exist, but flourished as a result.

His most strident indictment of this condition is in *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens's only novel-length treatment of the industrial working class. In this work, he uses both vitriol and satire to illustrate how this marginalized social stratum was termed "Hands" by the factory owners; that is, not really "people" but rather only appendages of the machines that they operated. His writings inspired others, in particular journalists and political figures, to address such problems of class oppression. For example, the prison scenes in *The Pickwick Papers* are claimed to have been influential in having the Fleet Prison shut down.

As Karl Marx said, Dickens, and the other novelists of Victorian England, "...issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together...". The exceptional popularity of his novels, even those with socially oppositional themes (*Bleak House*, 1853; *Little Dorrit*, 1857; *Our Mutual Friend*, 1865) underscored not only his almost preternatural ability to create compelling storylines and unforgettable characters, but also ensured that the Victorian public confronted issues of social justice that had commonly been ignored.

## **A Few of Dickens' More Notable Works**

*The Pickwick Papers*

*Sketches by Boz*

*The Old Curiosity Shop*

*Oliver Twist*

*Nicholas Nickleby*

*Barnaby Rudge*

*A Christmas Carol*

*Martin Chuzzlewit*

*A Tale of Two Cities*

*David Copperfield*

*Great Expectations*

*Bleak House*

*Little Dorrit*

*Hard Times*

*Our Mutual Friend*

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