Overview - Charles Dickens

Charles (John Huffam) Dickens

Major Authors and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults, 2002 Updated: April 27, 2004

- Born: February 07, 1812 in Portsmouth, United Kingdom
- Died: June 09, 1870 in Gad's Hill, United Kingdom
- Other Names: Dickens, Charles John Huffam; Boz
- Nationality: British
- Occupation: Novelist

Novelist, journalist, court reporter, editor, and amateur actor. Editor of London Daily News, 1846; founder and editor of Household Words, 1833-35, and of All the Year Round, 1859-70; presented public readings of his works, beginning 1858.

Born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England; died of a paralytic stroke, at Gad's Hill, Kent, England, June 18, 1870; buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey; son of John (a clerk in the Navy Pay Office) and Elizabeth (Barrow) Dickens; married Catherine Hogarth, April, 1836; children: ten.

Education: Taught at home by mother; attended a Dame School at Chatham for a short time, and Wellington Academy in London; further educated by reading widely in the British Museum.

Charles Dickens, the most widely read Victorian novelist, is now appreciated more for his "dark" novels than for his humorous works. Albert Borowitz, writing in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, said that, since 1950, more has been written each year about Dickens than about any other English author except William Shakespeare.

Dickens was born in 1812 on the outskirts of Portsea (now part of Portsmouth), England, in a lower middle-class family, where his father was employed in the Navy Pay Office. (Later, Dickens would satirize his father's improvidence in the character of Micawber in David Copperfield.) While he was still quite young, the family was transferred to Chatham, where Charles spent what were probably the happiest years of his life. Here he discovered books, and was taken to the theater at an early age. He was a lonely boy who found his company in books and his amusement in impersonating his favorite characters. Dickens had a brief schooling in Chatham before the navy moved the family to London.

When Dickens was twelve years old, his family fell on hard times and he was put to work in a blacking warehouse, pasting labels on bottles of shoe-blacking. Here, he mingled with boys and men of the working class, experiencing and observing the devastating results of poverty. Due to this experience, as an adult he became the most outspoken and influential proponent of the lower classes in his era. Although this employment lasted only a short while, it was a hard time for the young boy.

Adding to the trauma of this experience, his father was incarcerated in the Marshalsea debtors' prison and, when the rest of his family moved in with his father, Dickens was forced to live alone in a rented room nearby, continuing to work to help support the family. Here he was often lonesome and hungry, but he did meet many boys who later served as models for his fictional characters. The episode lasted only a few weeks, but it made a deep impression. In a biographical sketch of Dickens in the
Encyclopedia of World Biography, the contributor wrote: “This experience of lonely hardship was the most significant formative event of his life; it colored his view of the world in profound and varied ways and is directly or indirectly described in a number of his novels, including The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, and Little Dorrit, as well as David Copperfield. . . . In a fragmentary autobiography Dickens wrote, ‘It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. . . . My father and mother were quite satisfied. . . . My whole nature was so penetrated with grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.’” However, the experience gave him a determination to succeed. J. B. Priestly wrote in his biography Charles Dickens that “it was the feeling of being thrust, uncared for, in a dark blind alley that wounded him so deeply,” and “much of the darkness in Dickens comes from this time.”

Dickens spent the next three years at Wellington House Academy, where he rose to the head of his class. His experiences in school later gave him the basis for many of the chapters of David Copperfield. While in school he learned shorthand and started writing items called “penny-a-line stuff,” which he sent to the British Press. He spent his free time reading books in the British Museum, becoming familiar with the works of the popular novelists who had preceded him.

Dickens next became an office boy for a firm of solicitors, absorbing much atmosphere and background. There he developed his shorthand skills so well that he became a freelance reporter, excelling at reporting court proceedings and parliamentary debates. Dickens had always loved the theater, and while still working as a reporter prepared himself for a stage audition, but he became ill the day it was scheduled and never reapplied. However, he wrote many plays and dramatic pieces, and in later years he used his talent in his amateur theatrical performances and public readings from his books.

When he was twenty-one, Dickens submitted his first sketch for publication. “A Dinner at Poplar Walk” appeared in Monthly Magazine in January, 1834. The author was overcome with emotion, but he received no payment for his work until he established his literary credentials. In 1836 his periodical contributions were collected and printed as Sketches by Boz. The collection was well received and started him on his lifetime career.

In 1834 Dickens had become friendly with a fellow journalist, George Hogarth. On the strength of his literary success, Dickens married Hogarth’s daughter, Kate, in 1836. Their marriage produced ten children, but eventually ended in a separation in 1858.

When he was twenty-four, Dickens was asked to write a series of sketches to accompany illustrations of humorous sporting scenes by artist Robert Seymour. He responded with monthly installments of The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, (or Pickwick Papers), which soon became more popular than the pictures. This series was probably the favorite of the Victorian audience, and was beloved in America and Russia. Actually, according to the Encyclopedia of World Biography, “The entire form of serial publication became a standard method of writing and producing fiction in the Victorian period and affected the literary methods of Dickens and other novelists. So great was Dickens’ success with the procedure--summed up in the formula, ‘Make them laugh; make them cry; make them wait’--that Pickwick became one of the most popular works of the time, continuing to be so
after it was published in book form in 1837.

In 1836 Dickens wrote the libretto for a comic opera, *The Village Coquettes*, which was performed and well received. The next year he published the first of twenty-four monthly installments of *Oliver Twist*. Fascinated with crime even as a youngster, Dickens would have his nurse read him bedtime stories of murderers and criminals, and he based many fictional characters on real-life law-breakers. As he matured he developed a strong sense of social responsibility relating to crime and punishment. He wrote *Oliver* to serve his reformist purposes, attacking the "poor laws" and city slums that bred criminals and crime. Some readers objected; instead of the light-hearted fun of *Pickwick* there was shock at the brutality and crime. As noted in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "*Oliver* expresses Dickens's interest in the life of the slums to the fullest, as it traces the fortunes of an innocent orphan through the London streets. It seems remarkable today that this novel's fairly frank treatment of criminals like Bill Sikes, prostitutes like Nancy, and 'fences' like Fagin could have been acceptable to the Victorian reading public. But so powerful was Dickens's portrayal of the 'little boy lost' amid the lowlife of the East End that the limits of his audience's tolerance were gradually stretched." While some readers objected to *Oliver* and the installment system of publishing it were very successful. From that time all of Dickens' novels were first published in monthly installments. Readers could hardly wait for the next issue to appear—and the author had to stick to the job to have it ready in time.

Dickens was now embarking on a career that would be one of the most consistently successful writing careers of the nineteenth century. These works were followed by *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which the story of Little Nell had readers standing in the streets to grab the next issue as soon as it appeared. Priestly told how in America "crowds waiting for the ship from England at the pier in New York cried to the sailors, 'Is Little Nell dead?,' and then America wept."

In 1842 Charles and Kate sailed to America, leaving their ten children with friends. They made an extensive tour, south to Virginia and then west to St. Louis by riverboat. Priestly notes that Dickens "had the greatest welcome that probably any visitor to America has ever had." During this time the author wrote nothing but letters home; on this trip he came to see and be seen, not to lecture. He was strongly opposed to slavery, openly supporting abolition and other reforms. Upon returning to England he wrote *American Notes*, a pointed and critical expose of the cultural backwardness and aggressive materialism he saw entrenched in U.S. culture. *American Notes* is his report on his travels. Later he wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit* to reflect his experiences in and disillusionment with the United States. This book failed to meet public approval, so Dickens took another subject, and wrote a story about selfishness. *A Christmas Carol* was the first of his Christmas books, and probably his best known; it has been presented in many different ways: on the stage, as a film, and in annual showings on television.

In 1849 Dickens took his family to Italy, where they traveled extensively, but he found work there difficult because of the noise of all the bells. However, he used this as a basis for a new Christmas book, *The Chimes*, and then returned home to give a reading of it in London. However, he neglected his writing at this time to become involved in amateur theatricals, acting and stage managing the whole production. He then began a newspaper called *The Daily News*, of which he became editor. He quickly tired of this responsibility, and, turning the paper over to a friend, took his family to Switzerland. There he began *Dombey and Son*, but soon put it aside to write his next annual Christmas book.
In 1850 Dickens started working as editor and publisher of a weekly paper called *Household Words*. This eventually became *All the Year Round*. He also began publishing some of his own books. Then, in 1851, Dickens' father and one of his daughters died within two weeks of each other—events that deeply affected him. *Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit,* and *Our Mutual Friend* were created during this phase of Dickens' career, partly in response to his losses. The writer for the *Encyclopedia of World Biography* noted that "these 'dark' novels... rank among the greatest triumphs of the art of fiction. The first of these, *Bleak House* (1852-1853), has perhaps the most complicated plot of any English novel, but the narrative twists serve to create a sense of the interrelationship of all segments of English society. Indeed, it has been maintained that this network of interrelations is the true subject of the novel, designed to express Thomas Carlyle's view that 'organic filaments' connect every member of society with every other member of whatever class. The novel provides, then, a chastening lesson to social snobbery and personal selfishness." In a *Library Journal* review of the audio-cassette version of the novel, Jo Carr wrote: "This may be one of the most Dickensian novels Dickens ever wrote."

Dickens ultimately bought Gad's Hill in Chatham, a house he had admired as a child. In 1857 he experienced the beginning of a personal crisis when, after many years in an incompatible marriage, he fell in love with actress Ellen Ternan. He eventually separated from his wife, who took their oldest daughter with her. Dickens and the other eight children remained at Gad's Hill, while he provided another home for the Ternan family. His relationship with Ternan, kept secret throughout his lifetime, was not revealed until publication of *Dickens and Daughter* in 1939.

In 1859 Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities* and seventeen articles, which appeared as a book in 1860 titled *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Dickens next tried giving professional public readings from his own books; he eventually appeared all over England and even in America, where he was immensely popular. These readings amounted to one-man theatrical productions and demanded a great deal of energy, and he continued to do them in spite of failing health and depression. Priestly said he "aged fast during these years" and "was warned he must stop the readings and work quietly in his study." He continued to drive himself until the spring of 1870, when he finally retired from public readings to work on his final book, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which Borowitz described as "his only pure mystery novel." Unfortunately, Dickens' untimely death from a stroke when only six installments had been written left the work a mystery for future readers to puzzle over.

Dickens had wished for a quiet funeral and burial in a little local graveyard, but public opinion demanded he be buried in Westminster Abbey, where thousands passed his grave and for months heaped fresh flowers on his tombstone. In a biographical essay in *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, the writer noted Dickens' death elicited Henry Longfellow to comment that he had "never known an author's death to cause such general mourning," and England's Thomas Carlyle to write: "It is an event world-wide, a unique of talents suddenly extinct." The day after his death, the newspaper Dickens once edited, the *London Daily News*, reported that Dickens had been "emphatically the novelist of his age. In his pictures of contemporary life posterity will read, more clearly than in contemporary records, the character of nineteenth century life."


- The Uncommercial Traveller, Chapman & Hall (London, England), 1861, Sheldon, 1865,


WITH WILKIE COLLINS


(With Charles Fechter) No Thoroughfare, A Drama in Five Acts, De Witt (New York, NY), 1867.


COLLECTIONS


UNDER PSEUDONYM BOZ

Dickens' most popular works continually appear in a myriad of editions and reprints from various publishers, edited, illustrated, and annotated by, with introductions and forewords by, many different scholars. Several have been translated into other languages.

Adaptations
- Motion pictures based on A Christmas Carol include a silent film produced by Essanay, 1908; and sound films produced by Universal Studios, 1915; United Artists, 1951, featuring Alastair Sim; a musical version starring Albert Finney and Alec Guinness, 1970; United Productions of America, 1972, with the animated character Mr. Magoo; Walt Disney Studios' adaptation, Mickey's Christmas Carol, 1983; Paramount Pictures' adaptation, Scrooged, adapted by Mitch Glazer and Michael O'Donoghue, starring Bill Murray; and Jim Henson Productions' Muppet Christmas Carol, 1992. A Christmas Carol has also been adapted for television, including the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) animated special, The Stingiest Man in Town, 1979, featuring the voice of Walter Matthau; and A Christmas Carol, 1984, featuring George C. Scott.

- David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities, and Bleak House have been adapted for television by Masterpiece Theatre. Nicholas Nikileby was adapted by Joellen Bland as a Broadway play, 1990, and was adapted for television by Mobil Showcase. Great Expectations was adapted for television by the Disney Channel.

- David Copperfield was adapted to film by Thanhouser, 1911; MGM, 1934, featuring Freddie Bartholomew, W. C. Fields, and Lionel Barrymore; and in 1972, featuring Susan Hampshire. It was also adapted as a television miniseries in 1958 by TV Paulista, Brazil. A Tale of Two Cities has been adapted for film and television, including W. P. Lipscomb's adaptation for MGM, 1935, with Ronald Coleman; and in 1957, with Dirk Bogarde. Oliver Twist has been adapted for film, including Eugene Mullin's adaptation for Vitagraph, 1909; Elizabeth Meehan's adaptation for Monogram, 1933, featuring Dickie Moore; an adaptation by David Lean and Stanley Hayes for Cineguild, 1948, with Alec Guinness; and Monte Merrick's television adaptation for Disney, 1997. Oliver Twist was also adapted as the stage musical, Oliver, New London Theater, 1960, and was filmed by Columbia, 1968, featuring Ron Moody and Jack Wild. Great Expectations was adapted for film by Paul West, 1917, for Paramount; and by David Lean and others, 1976, for Cineguild, featuring Jean Simmons and John Mills. Little Dorrit was adapted for film by English Sands, 1987. The Pickwick Papers was filmed in 1955, with Nigel Patrick and Hermione Gingold.

- A musical melodrama based on Barnaby Rudge was written by Ruth Wallace in 1980; The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge and Unequal Partners: Charles Dickens, Willie Collins, and Victorian Authorship, books based on Dickens' works, were scheduled for release in 2002;
Rain of Years: Great Expectations and the World of Dickens was released in 2001; various collected works continue to be published, and many works have been adapted for audio cassette, digital recording, and book and audio educational combinations.

Further Readings

Books
- Ackroyd, Peter, Dickens, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990, pp. xiii, 34.
- Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 23, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1998.
- Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults, Volume 3, Beacham Publishing (Osprey, FL), 1990.
- Borowitz, Albert, article in Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 70, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1988.
- Dickens, Charles, David Copperfield, Lea & Blanchard, 1851.
- A Dictionary of Biographies of Authors Represented in the Authors Digest Series, Authors Press (New York, NY), 1927, reprinted, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1974.


*Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Volume 50, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1996.


Shaw, John Mackay, *Childhood in Poetry*, 3rd Supplement, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1980.

*Short Story Criticism*, Volume 17, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1995.

Slater, Michael, *Dickens and Women*, Dent, 1983.


*Victorian Fantasy*, Indiana University Press, 1979, pp. 54-64.


• *World Literature Criticism. 1500 to the Present*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.


**Periodicals**


• *Dublin University Magazine*, April, 1844, review of *A Christmas Carol*; December, 1861, review of *Great Expectations*, pp. 685-693.


• *Examiner*, December 10, 1859, review of *A Tale of Two Cities*, pp. 788-789.

• *Fraser's Magazine*, December, 1850, review of *David Copperfield*, pp. 698-710.


• *Horn Book*, January-February, 1996, p. 73.


• *Morning Chronicle*, February 11, 1836, review of *Sketches by Boz*.


• *Publishers Weekly*, March 7, 1995, p. 36; September 18, 1995, p. 96; October 9, 2000, review of
The Child’s Story, p. 86.

- *Spectator*, November 24, 1838, review of *Oliver Twist*, pp. 1114-1116.

Other

Source Citation

Gale Document Number: GALE|K1617001217