Charles Dickens  biography

SYNOPSIS

British novelist Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England. Over the course of his writing career, he wrote the beloved classic novels Oliver Twist, A Christmas Carol, Nicholas Nickleby, David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations. On June 9, 1870, Dickens died of a stroke in Kent, England, leaving his final novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, unfinished.

EARLY LIFE

Famed British author Charles Dickens was born Charles John Huffam Dickens on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. He was the second of eight children. His father, John Dickens, was a naval clerk who dreamed of striking it rich. Charles Dickens’ mother, Elizabeth Barrow, aspired to be a teacher and school director. Despite his parents’ best efforts, the family remained poor. Nevertheless, they were happy in the early days. In 1816, they moved to Chatham, Kent, where young Charles and his siblings were free to roam the countryside and explore the old castle at Rochester.

In 1822, the Dickens family moved to Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London. By then the family’s financial situation had grown dire, as John Dickens had a dangerous habit of living beyond the family’s means. Eventually, John was sent to prison for debt in 1824, when Charles was just 12 years old.

Following his father’s imprisonment, Charles Dickens was forced to leave school to work at a boot-blacking factory alongside the River Thames. At the rundown, rodent-ridden factory, Dickens earned six shillings a week labeling pots of “blacking,” a substance used to clean fireplaces. It was the best he could do to help support his family. Looking back on the experience, Dickens saw it as the moment he said goodbye to his youthful innocence, stating that he wondered “how [he] could be so easily cast away at such a young age.” He felt abandoned and betrayed by the adults who were supposed to take care of him. These sentiments would later become a recurring theme in his writing.

Much to his relief, Dickens was permitted to go back to school when his father received a family inheritance and used it to pay off his debts. But when Dickens was 15, his education was pulled out from under him once again. In 1827, he had to drop out of school and work as an office boy to contribute to his family’s income. As it turned out, the job became an early launching point for his writing career.

Within a year of being hired, Dickens began freelance reporting at the law courts of London. Just a few years later, he was reporting for two major London newspapers. In 1833, he began submitting sketches to various magazines and newspapers under the pseudonym “Boz.” In 1836, his clippings were published in his first book, Sketches by Boz. Dickens’ first success caught the eye of Catherine Hogarth, whom he soon married. Catherine would grace Charles with a brood of 10 children before the couple separated in 1858.

EARLY WRITING

In the same year that Sketches by Boz was released, Dickens started publishing The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club.

His series of sketches, originally written as captions for artist Robert Seymour’s humorous sports-themed illustrations, took the form of monthly serial installments. The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club was wildly popular with readers. In fact, Dickens’ sketches were even more popular than the illustrations they were meant to accompany.

Around this time, Dickens had also become publisher of a magazine called Bentley’s Miscellany. In it he started publishing his first novel, Oliver Twist, which follows the life of an orphan living in the streets. The story was inspired by how Dickens felt as an impoverished child forced to get by on his wits and earn his own keep. Dickens continued showcasing Oliver Twist in the magazines he later edited, including Household Words and All the Year Round, the latter of which he founded. The novel was extremely well received in both England and America. Dedicated readers of Oliver Twist eagerly anticipated the next monthly installment.

Over the next few years, Dickens struggled to match the level of Oliver Twist’s success. From 1838 to 1841, he published The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop and Barnaby Rudge.

In 1842, Dickens and his wife, Kate, embarked on a five-month lecture tour of the United States, leaving their 10 children at home with friends. Upon their return, Dickens penned American Notes for General Circulation, a sarcastic travelogue criticizing American culture and materialism.

In 1843, Dickens wrote his novel The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, a story about a man’s struggle to survive on the ruthless American frontier. The book was published the following year.

Over the next couple of years, Dickens published two Christmas stories. One was the classic A Christmas Carol, which features the timeless protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge, a
curmudgeonly old miser, who, with the help of a ghost, finds the Christmas spirit.

FAME

During his first U.S. tour, in 1842, Dickens designated himself as what many have deemed the first modern celebrity. He spoke of his opposition to slavery and expressed his support for additional reform. His lectures, which began in Virginia and ended in Missouri, were so widely attended that ticket scalpers started gathering outside his events. Biographer J.B. Priestly wrote that during the tour, Dickens “had the greatest welcome that probably any visitor to America has ever had.”

“They flock around me as if I were an idol,” bragged Dickens, a known show-off. Although he enjoyed the attention at first, he eventually resented the invasion of privacy. He was also annoyed by what he viewed as Americans’ gregariousness and crude habits, as he later expressed in American Notes.

In light of his criticism of the American people during his first tour, Dickens launched a second U.S. tour, from 1867 to 1868, hoping to set things right with the public.

On his second tour, he made a charismatic speech promising to praise the United States in reprints of American Notes for General Circulation and The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit.

His 76 readings earned him no less than $95,000, which, in the Victoria era, amounted to approximately $1.5 million in current U.S. dollars.

Back at home, Dickens had become so famous that people recognized him all over London as he strolled around the city collecting the observations that would serve as inspiration for his future work.

LATER YEARS

In 1845, after Dickens had toured the United States once, he spent a year in Italy writing Pictures from Italy. Over the next two years he published, in installments, his first major novel, Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son. The novel’s main theme is how business tactics affect a family’s personal finances. It takes a dark view of England and was pivotal to Dickens’ body of work in that it set the tone for his other novels.

From 1849 to 1850, Dickens worked on David Copperfield, the first work of its kind; no one had ever written a novel that simply followed a character through his everyday life. In writing it, Dickens tapped into his own personal experiences, from his difficult childhood to his work as a journalist. Although David Copperfield is not considered Dickens’ best work, it was his personal favorite. It also helped define the public’s expectations of a Dickensian novel.

During the 1850s, Dickens suffered two devastating losses: the deaths of his daughter and father. He also separated from his wife during that decade. Consequently, his novels began to express his darkened worldview. In Bleak House, published in installments from 1852 to 1853, he deals with the hypocrisy of British society. It was considered his most complex novel to date. Hard Times (published in 1854) takes place in an industrial town at the peak of economic expansion. In it, Dickens focuses on the shortcomings of employers as well as those who seek change. Also among Dickens’ darker novels is Little Dorrit, a fictional study of how human values come in conflict with the world’s brutality.

Coming out of his “dark novel” period, in 1859 Dickens published A Tale of Two Cities, a historical novel that takes place during the French Revolution. He published it in a periodical he founded, All the Year Round. His next novel, Great Expectations (1860-1861), focuses on the protagonist’s lifelong journey of moral development. It is widely considered his greatest literary accomplishment. A few years later, Dickens produced Our Mutual Friend, a novel that analyzes the psychological impact of wealth on London society.

DEATH

In 1865, Dickens was in a train accident and never fully recovered. Despite his fragile condition, he continued to tour until 1870. On June 9, 1870, Dickens had a stroke and, at age 58, died at Gad’s Hill Place, his country home in Kent, England. He was buried in Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey, with thousands of mourners gathering at the beloved author’s gravesite. Scottish satirical writer Thomas Carlyle described Dickens’ passing as “an event worldwide, a unique of talents suddenly extinct.” At the time of Dickens’ death, his final novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, was left unfinished.

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INTRODUCTION
Considered by many critics to be Charles Dickens's most psychologically acute self-portrait, Great Expectations is without a doubt one of Dickens's most fully-realized literary creations.

Work on Great Expectations commenced in late September of 1860 at what proved to be a peak of emotional intensity for its author. Two years before, Dickens had separated from Catherine, his wife of twenty-two years; and several weeks prior to the beginning of this novel, Dickens had burned all his papers and correspondence of the past twenty years at his Gad's Hill estate. This action, in retrospect, can be viewed as a sort of spiritual purge – an attempt to break decisively from the past in order (paradoxically) to fully embrace it, as he does so resonantly in this work.

The writing of Great Expectations, and by extension the creation of its protagonist, Pip, therefore, can be viewed as a kind of excavation for its author, a cathartic attempt to come to terms with the painful facts of his childhood – particularly the family's chronic economic instability, culminating in his father's imprisonment due to financial insolvency. Also paramount in his psychological make-up were Dickens's consignment at the age of twelve to work as a child laborer at Warren's Blacking factory (a secret no one but his closest friend, John Forster, and wife, Catherine, knew) and his subsequent separation from his family as a result; all of which took place over the course of two months. This period in the young boy's life, then, represents both a literal and metaphorical "orphaning" and was certainly the crucible in which his personality was formed. This sense of primal loss, and fear of impending economic ruin manifested itself later in Dickens's own Herculean and obsessive efforts to busy himself (often simultaneously) as a writer, editor, and public speaker – as if this were the only way he could ensure himself of financial solvency.

Where the creator (Dickens) and his creation (Pip) diverge is that the protagonist (through his suffering and disappointment) learns to accept his station in life. By the end of his saga, Pip has, for the most part, shed his illusions (his "expectations") and is able to live a simple but fulfilling life.

Dickens, on the other hand, it seems never adequately internalized the lessons of his own life and success. In an autobiographical fragment, he once wrote: "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" (as a child laborer).

Written in the last decade of his life, Great Expectations is also a meditation on the act of writing (as a book of memory) and the creative imagination, opening as it does with the young Pip (aged seven) in the churchyard, attempting to conjure up through sheer will, a physical picture of his (never-seen) parents by carefully studying the lettering on their tombstones. This memorable scene is a metaphorical attempt to raise the dead through an act of pure imagination.

Serialized between December 1, 1860, and August 3, 1861, Great Expectations was an extraordinary success, selling (midway through its run), over one hundred thousand copies weekly in Dickens's magazine All the Year Round. Published in book form in July 1861, it was considered by contemporary critics to represent a return to Dickens at the peak of his powers, deftly mixing comedy and tragedy and with a rich brew of major and minor characters. By the end of that summer, the book had gone through four printings. Later critics were equally responsive. Playwright George Bernard Shaw felt that Great Expectations was Dickens's "most compactly perfect book." The poet Swinburne believed the story of the novel to be unparalleled "in the whole range of English fiction."

Narrated by a middle-aged Pip, Great Expectations can be read on many levels – as a morality play of a young boy's coming of age; and his sudden and unexpected rise from the lower to that of the leisure class (due to the anonymous efforts of a mysterious benefactor). The novel can also be read as an ironic commentary: a social critique on money (as commodity) and how that commodity affects everyone around it. It can also be enjoyed as a rattling good mystery story replete with secrets; as well as with shady characters, thieves and murderers of all stripes. In the end, Great Expectations is an unforgettable tale about fate, and how a chance encounter between an orphan named Pip and an escaped convict radically and arbitrarily alters the lives of everyone around them.

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