

# Charles Dickens Biography



English author Charles Dickens continues to be one of the most widely read Victorian (nineteenth-century) novelists. Scrooge, David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, and Nicholas Nickleby remain familiar characters today. His novels describe the life and conditions of the poor and working class in the Victorian era of England, when people lived by strict rules.

## Childhood and schooling

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, at Portsea (later part of Portsmouth) on the southern coast of England, to John and Elizabeth Dickens. Charles was the second born of eight children. His father was a pay clerk in the navy office. Because of financial difficulties, the family moved about until they settled in Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London, England. At the age of twelve Charles worked with working-class men and boys in a factory that handled "blacking," or shoe polish. While his father was in debtor's prison, the rest of the family moved to live near the prison, leaving Charles to live alone. This experience of lonely hardship was the most significant event of his life. It colored his view of the world and would later be described in a number of his novels.

Charles returned to school when his father received an inheritance and was able to repay his debts. But in 1827, at age fifteen, he was again forced leave school and work as an office boy. In the following year he became a freelance reporter and stenographer (using shorthand to transcribe documents) at the law courts of London. By 1832 he had become a reporter for two London newspapers and, in the following year, began to contribute a series of impressions and sketches to other newspapers and magazines, signing some of them "Boz." These scenes of London life went far to establish his reputation and were published in 1836 as *Sketches by Boz*.

his first book. On the strength of this success Charles married Catherine Hogarth. Together they had ten children.

### Early works

In 1836 Dickens also began to publish *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* in monthly installments, a form of serial publication that became a standard method of writing and producing fiction in the Victorian period. So great was Dickens's success with the procedure that *Pickwick* became one of the most popular works of the time, and continued to be so after it was published in book form in 1837.

After *Pickwick*'s success, Dickens began publishing his new novel, *Oliver Twist*. He was also now editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a new monthly magazine. He continued publishing his novel in his later magazines, *Household Worlds* and *All the Year Round*. *Oliver Twist* expressed Dickens's interest in the life of the slums to the fullest, as it traced the fortunes of an innocent orphan through the London streets.

Though Dickens's career was successful, for the next decade his books did not achieve the standard of his early successes. These works include: *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1841), and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841).

In 1842 Dickens, who was as popular in America as he was in England, went on a five-month lecture tour of the United States, speaking out strongly against slavery and in support of other reforms. On his return he wrote *American Notes*, a book that criticizes American life as being culturally backward and materialistic (characterized by the desire for wealth and material goods). His next novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844), describes the hero finding that survival on the American frontier is more difficult than making his way in England. During the years in which *Chuzzlewit* appeared, Dickens also published two Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Chimes*.

### First major novels

After a year abroad in Italy and writing *Pictures from Italy* (1846), Dickens published installments of *Dombey and Son*, which continued till 1848. This completed novel established a new standard in the Dickensian novel and marked the turning point in his career. As its full title indicates, *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son* is a study of the influence of the values of a business society on the personal fortunes of a family and those with whom the family meets. It takes a somber view of England at mid-century, and its tone becomes characteristic of Dickens's future novels.

Dickens's next novel, *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), is the first complete record of the typical course of a young man's life in Victorian England. This autobiographical novel fictionalized elements of Dickens's childhood, his pursuit of a journalism career, and his love life. Though *Copperfield* is not Dickens's greatest novel, it was his personal favorite.

In 1850 Dickens began a new magazine, *Household Words*. His editorials and articles touched upon English politics, social institutions, and family life. They also spoke to the fictional treatment of these subjects in Dickens's novels. The weekly magazine ran to 1859, when Dickens

began to conduct a new weekly, *All the Year Round*. In both these periodicals he published some of his major novels.

### "Dark" novels

The 1850s were a sad and dark time for Dickens. In 1851, within a two-week period, Dickens's father and one of his daughters died. In 1858, a year after he fell in love with an actress, he separated from his wife.

Partly in response to the deaths, Dickens's next series of works were called his "dark" novels, though they rank among the greatest triumphs of the art of fiction. In *Bleak House* (1852–1853), perhaps the most complicated plot of any English novel, the narrative served to create a sense of the interrelationship of all segments of English society. In *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens describes an English industrial town during the height of economic expansion, and details an up-close view of the limitations of both employers and reformers.

*Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) may be regarded as Dickens's greatest novel. In it he portrays the conditions of England as he saw it, and the conflict between the world's harshness and human values in its most impressive artistic form.

### Later works

In this period Dickens also began to give public readings from his novels, which became even more popular than his lectures. In 1859 Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel of the French Revolution. Besides publishing this novel in the newly founded *All the Year Round*, Dickens also published seventeen articles, which appeared as a book in 1860 entitled *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

Dickens's next novel, *Great Expectations* (1860–1861), is regarded by some as his most perfectly executed work of art. It is a story of a young man's moral development from childhood to adult life. Three years later he produced *Our Mutual Friend*, which provides an insight of how he viewed London.

For several years Dickens's health declined. He never fully recovered from a railroad accident in 1865. He tired himself out by continuing to travel throughout the British Isles and America to read before audiences. He gave a final series of readings in London that began in 1870.

Dickens died of a fatal stroke on June 9, 1870, leaving the novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, unfinished. The day of his burial was made a day of national mourning in England.

## **Home Life for Rich versus Poor Citizens in Victorian England**

Adapted from Mandy Barrow

Poor people in Victorian times lived in horrible cramped conditions in run-down houses, often with the whole family in one room.

Many people during the Victorian years moved into the cities and towns to find work in the factories. People crowded into already crowded houses. Rooms were rented to whole families or perhaps several families.

Most poor houses only had one or two rooms downstairs and one or two upstairs. Families would crowd into these rooms, with several in each room and some living in the cellars. These houses had no running water or toilets. Each house would share an outside water pump. The water from the pump was frequently polluted. Some streets would have one or two outside toilets for the whole street to share.

Houses were built close together with narrow streets between them and open sewers running down the middle of the streets. Rubbish was tipped into the streets. It was no surprise that few children made it to adulthood.

Homes for the middle classes and the upper classes were much better. They were better built and were larger. The houses had most of the new gadgets installed, such as flushing toilets, gas lighting, and inside bathrooms.

Wealthy Victorians decorated their homes in the latest styles. There would be heavy curtains, flowery wallpaper, carpets and rugs, ornaments, well-made furniture, paintings and plants. The rooms were heated by open coal fires and lighting was provided by candles and oil or gas lamps. Later in the Victorian period, electricity became more widespread and so electric lights were used.

Most rich people had servants and they would live in the same house. They slept on the top floor of the house or in the attic. The servant rooms were often cold in the winter and stuffy in the summer.

Additionally, rich families had large houses, with a special room for children called the nursery. This was often at the top of the house. In the nursery younger children ate, played and slept. They were looked after by a woman called a nanny. She took them for walks in the park or to the zoo. Some rich children saw their parents only in the morning and evening, and were looked after mostly by their nanny and by other servants. Most Victorians thought children should be 'seen and not heard'.

## **Working Conditions in Victorian England**

Adapted from Mandy Barrow

In a Victorian town, it was easy to tell who was rich and who was poor. Children from richer homes were well fed, wore warm clothes, and had shoes on their feet. They did not work, but went to school or had lessons at home.

Poor children looked thin and hungry, wore ragged clothes, and some had no shoes. Poor children had to work. They were lucky if they went to school.

Rich adults often worked as factory owners or rich company bosses. Rich people did not have to work as much as other people. The father of the house would usually be the one to go to work. He would work as a doctor, lawyer, banker, a shop owner, or a factory owner.

Workhouses/Poor houses were where poor people who had no job or no home lived. They earned their keep by doing jobs in the workhouse. Also in the workhouses were orphaned and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers.

Workhouses were often very large and were feared by the poor and old. Women, children and men had different living and working areas in the workhouse, so families were split up. To make things even worse they could be punished if they even tried to speak to one another!



The education the children received did not include the two most important skills of all, reading and writing, which were needed to get a good job.

The poor were made to wear a uniform. This meant that everyone looked the same and everyone outside knew they were poor and lived in the workhouse.

Upon entering the workhouse, the poor were stripped and bathed (under supervision). The food was tasteless and was the same day after day.

The young and old – as well as men and women – were made to work hard, often unpleasant jobs.

Children could also find themselves 'hired out' (sold) to work in factories or mines.

# Treatment of Children in Victorian England

Adapted from Vaijayanti Joshi

The lifestyle of a child during the Victorian era was decided on the basis of the house he was born in. If a child was born to wealthy parents, things like luxuries, excellent food, and the best education are a few things that were guaranteed. However, if a child was born in a less fortunate home, things were difficult for the child.

Boys born in a wealthy family were often sent to boarding for education or were tutored at home by eminent tutors while girls were trained in household activities like sewing, knitting etc. which would make them the perfect housewives.

Things were very different in the case of children born in poor families. In their situation, children as small as three or five-year-old were employed by industrial units as they were an important source of labor to the industries but despite the hard work, they could be paid a very mere sum.

The children worked for long tiring hours in the factories doing hazardous jobs. Children, especially boys around the age of eleven or twelve years were employed to clean chimneys. The basic reason why children were driven to work and jeopardize their lives was because Victorian people lived in large families.



This attitude exploited the children rather than saving their innocent childhood. The plight of working children was such that they were made to work hard and for long duration as their parents did. Even the Parliament was in favor of child labor. The conditions in which the children were kept were pathetic.

Children whose families could not find work or had no home were forced to go a work house. Workhouses/Poor houses were where poor people who had no job or no home lived. They earned their keep by doing jobs in the workhouse.

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