

# Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

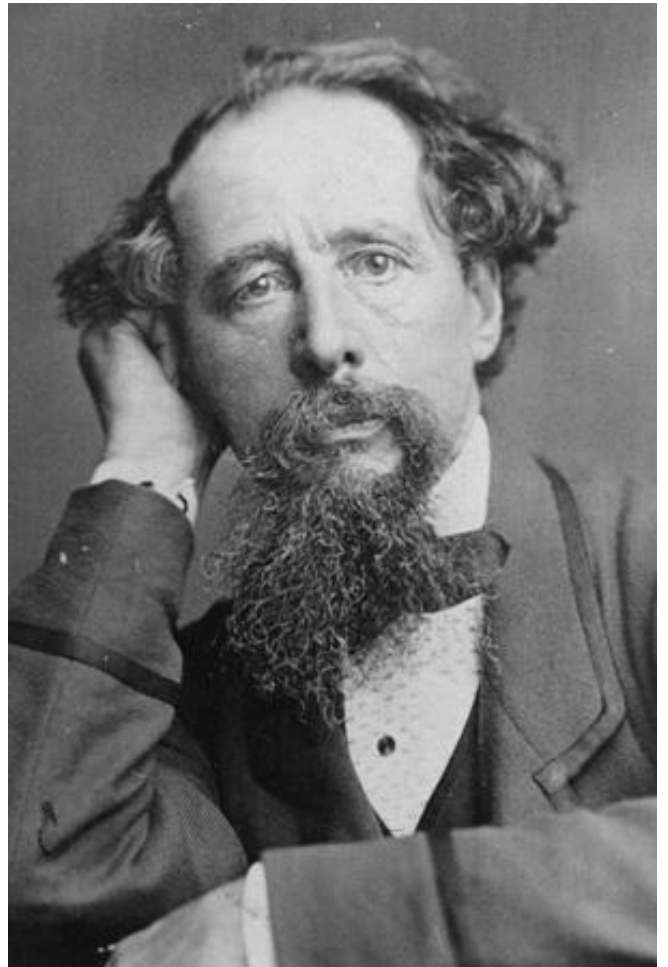
## Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature

### Overview

Charles Dickens wrote fourteen full novels as well as sketches, travel, and Christmas books, and was at work on his fifteenth novel when he died. He took chances, dealt with social issues, and did not shy away from big ideas. Almost all of Dickens's novels display his comic gift, his deep social concerns, and his talent for creating vivid characters. Many of his creations, most notably Ebenezer Scrooge, have become familiar English literary stereotypes, and today many of his novels are considered classics.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Poverty and the Birth of Boz** Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, at Port-sea (later part of Portsmouth) on the southern coast of England. He was the son of a lower-middle-class father whose lack of financial foresight Dickens would later satirize in *David Copperfield*. Dickens's father constantly lived beyond his means and was eventually sent to debtor's prison, a jail specially reserved for people who could not pay back their debts. This deeply humiliated young Dickens, and even as an adult he was rarely able to speak of it. At the age of twelve he was forced to work in a factory for meager wages. Although the experience lasted only a few months, it left a permanent impression on Dickens.



Dickens returned to school after an inheritance relieved his father from debt, but he became an office boy at the age of fifteen. He learned shorthand and became a court reporter, which introduced him to journalism and aroused his contempt for politics. 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 helped establish Dickens's reputation and were published in 1836 as *Sketches by Boz*, his first book. On the strength of this success he married Catherine Hogarth. She eventually bore him ten children.

**Early Works** In 1836 Dickens began to publish *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* in monthly installments. Pickwick became one of the most popular works of the time. The comic heroes of the novel, the antiquarian members of the Pickwick Club, scour the English countryside for local

points of interest and become involved in a variety of humorous adventures that reveal the characteristics of English social life. Later, however, the chairman of the club is involved in a lawsuit that lands him in debtors' prison. The lighthearted atmosphere of the novel changes, and the reader is given hints of the gloom and sympathy with which Dickens was to imbue his later works.

During the years of *Pickwick's* serialization, Dickens became editor of a new monthly, *Bentley's Miscellany*. When *Pickwick* was completed, he began publishing his new novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), in its pages-- a practice he later continued. *Oliver Twist* traces the fortunes of an innocent orphan through the streets of London. It seems remarkable today that this novel's fairly frank treatment of criminals, prostitutes, and "fences" (receivers of stolen goods) 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 stretched.

Dickens was now firmly established in the most consistently successful career of any nineteenth-century author after the Scottish novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott. He could do no wrong as far as his readership was concerned, yet for the next decade his books would not achieve the standard of his early triumphs. These works include *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839), still cited for its exposé of brutality at an English boys' school; *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1841), remembered for hitting a high (or low) point of sentimentality in its portrayal of the sufferings of Little Nell; and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), still read as a historical novel, set as it is amid the anti-Catholic riots of 1780. Dickens wrote all these novels before he turned thirty, often working on two or three at a time.

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 for the abolition of slavery and other reforms. He returned to England deeply disappointed, dismayed by America's lack of support for an international copyright law, its acceptance of slavery, and what he saw as the general vulgarity of American people. On his return he wrote *American Notes*, which sharply criticized the cultural backwardness and aggressive materialism of American life. In his next novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844), the hero retreats from the difficulties of making his way in England, only to find that survival is even harder on the American frontier. During the years in which *Chuzzlewit* appeared, Dickens also published two Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *The Chimes* (1844), which became as much a part of the Christmas season as the traditional English plum pudding.

**First Major Novels** After a year in Italy, Dickens wrote *Pictures from Italy* (1846). After its publication, he began writing his next novel, *Dombey and Son*, which continued until 1848. This novel established a new standard in the Dickensian tradition and may be said to mark the turning point in his career. As its full title indicates, *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son*, the novel is a study of the influence of the values of a business society on the personal fortunes of the members of the Dombey family and those with whom they come in contact. It takes a somber view of England at midcentury, and its mournful tone becomes characteristic of Dickens's novels for the rest of his life.

Dickens's next novel, *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), combined broad social perspective with an effort to take stock of himself at the midpoint of his literary career. This autobiographical novel fictionalized elements of Dickens's childhood degradation, pursuit of a journalistic and literary vocation, and love life. It shows the first comprehensive record of the typical course of a young man's life in Victorian England.

In 1850 Dickens began to edit a new periodical, *Household Words*. His editorials and articles for this magazine cover the entire span of English politics, social institutions, and family life. The weekly magazine was a great success and ran to 1859, when Dickens began to conduct a new weekly, *All the Year Round*. He published some of his major novels in both these periodicals.

**“Dark” Novels** In 1851 Dickens was stricken by the death of his father and one of his daughters within two weeks. Partly in response to these losses, he embarked on a series of works that have come to be called his “dark” novels. The first of these, *Bleak House* (1852–1853), has perhaps the most complicated plot of any English novel, but the narrative twists create a sense of the interrelationship of all segments of English society. The novel offers a humbling lesson about social snobbery and personal selfishness.

Dickens's next novel is even more didactic in its criticism of selfishness. *Hard Times* (1854) was written specifically to challenge the common view that practicality and facts were of greater importance and value than feelings and persons. In his indignation at callousness in business and public educational systems, Dickens laid part of the charge for the heartlessness of Englishmen at the door of the utilitarian philosophy then much in vogue. This philosophy held that the moral worth of an action is defined by how it contributes to overall usefulness. But the lasting applicability of the novel lies in its intensely focused picture of an English industrial town in the heyday of capitalist expansion and in its keen view of the limitations of both employers and reformers.

The somber tone of *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* reflected the harsh social reality of an England infatuated with industrial progress at any price. Ironically, many of the societal ills that Dickens wrote about in such novels had already been righted by the time of their publication.

Some claim *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) is Dickens's greatest novel. In it he provides the same range of social observation he had developed in previous major works, but he creates two striking symbols as well. Dickens sums up the condition of England both specifically in the symbol of the debtors' prison, in which the heroine's father is entombed, and also generally in the many forms of personal servitude and confinement that are exhibited in the course of the plot. Second, Dickens raises to symbolic stature the child as innocent sufferer of the world's abuses. By making his heroine not a child but a childlike figure of Christian loving kindness, Dickens poses the central question of his work-- the conflict between the world's harshness and human values.

The year 1857 saw the beginnings of a personal crisis for Dickens when he fell in love with an actress named Ellen Ternan. He separated from his wife the following year, after many years of marital incompatibility. In this period Dickens also began to give much of his time and energy to public readings from his novels, which became even more popular than his lectures on topical questions.

**Later Works** In 1859 Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel of the French Revolution. While below the standard of the long and comprehensive “dark” novels, it evokes the historical period and tells of a surprisingly modern hero's self-sacrifice. Besides publishing this novel in the newly founded *All the Year Round*, Dickens also published seventeen articles, which appeared in 1860 as the book *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

Dickens's next novel, *Great Expectations* (1860– 1861), tells the story of a young man's moral development in the course of his life-- from childhood in the provinces to gentleman's status in London. Not an autobiographical novel like *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* belongs to the type of fiction called, in German, Bildungsroman (the novel of someone's education or formation by experience).

The next work in the Dickens canon took an unusual three years to write, but in 1864–1865 Dickens published *Our Mutual Friend*. In it, the novelist thoroughly and devastatingly presents the vision of English society in all its classes and institutions.

In the closing years of his life, Dickens worsened his declining health by giving numerous readings. He never fully recovered from an 1865 railroad accident, but insisted on traveling throughout the British Isles and America to read before wildly enthusiastic audiences. He broke down in 1869 and gave a final series of readings in London in the following year. He also began *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* but died in 1870, leaving it unfinished. His burial in Westminster Abbey was an occasion of national mourning. His tombstone reads: "He was a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world."

### Works in Literary Context

Charles Dickens's death on June 9, 1870, reverberated across the Atlantic, causing the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to say that he had never known "an author's death to cause such general mourning." English novelist Thomas Carlyle wrote: "It is an event world-wide, a unique of talents suddenly extinct." And 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."

***Oliver Twist*** With *Oliver Twist*, Dickens chose to write a kind of novel that was already highly popular, the so-called Newgate novel, named after London's well-known Newgate prison. Two previous stories of crime and punishment had been Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830) and Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834). Inevitably, Dickens did lose some readers who found the criminal aspect to be "painful and revolting," as one said. A different kind of reader was put off by the prominence of the social criticism in the opening chapters, in which Dickens exposes the cruel inadequacies of workhouse life as organized by the New Poor Law of 1834. The law made the workhouses, where people who could not support themselves were forced to live and work, essentially prisons with degrading conditions, and mandated the separation of families upon entering.

***Bleak House*** This work boils with discontents sometimes expressed in fiery abuse, discontents that are also prominent in other Dickens novels of the 1850s and 1860s. What is strange about the chronology is that the 1850s and 1860s, economically and in other areas, were not a dark period, but rather decades when the English seemed at last to have solved some of the big problems that had looked to be insoluble in the 1830s and 1840s.

## Works in Critical Context

Dickens preferred to write as an angry outsider, critical of the shortcomings of mid-Victorian values. Predictably, his “dark period” novels cost him some readers who felt that the attacks on institutions were misguided, unfair, and finally, tiresome. Obviously, not all of Dickens's contemporaries felt the same, for among the reading public, from Bleak House onward, his novels fared well, as they have continued to do. In fact, these are the novels that have been chiefly responsible for the remarkable “Dickens boom,” as author Hillis Miller called it, of the 1960s and after.

**Oliver Twist** The English critic and writer Angus Wilson noted that “perhaps more than any other,” *Oliver Twist* “has a combination of sensationalism and sentiment that fixes it as one of the masterpieces of pop art.” Critics of the day, such as that at the *Quarterly Review*, were quick to point out that Dickens dealt in hyperbole: “*Oliver Twist* is directed against the poor-law and workhouse system, and in our opinion with much unfairness. The abuses which [Dickens] ridicules are not only exaggerated, but in nineteen cases out of twenty do not exist at all.” Jack Lindsay in *Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study* wrote that “the last word ... must be given to Dickens's power to draw characters in a method of intense poetic simplification, which makes them simultaneously social emblems, emotional symbols, and visually precise individuals.” The book is also one of the more enduring classics of the Dickens canon, immortalized both by its 1948 film adaptation and the 1968 musical comedy *Oliver!*.

**Great Expectations** Many Victorian readers welcomed this novel for its humor after the “dark period” novels. But most critical discussions since 1950 argue that the Victorians were misled by some of its great comic scenes and also by Pip's career. Unlike the Victorians, modern critics see *Great Expectations* as a brilliant study of guilt, another very sad book-- another “dark period” novel, that is. Dickens, author Philip Hobsbaum noted, “warns us to put no trust in the surface of illusions or class and caste. Our basic personality is shaped in youth and can never change. ... Every hope of altering his condition that Pip, the central character, ever entertained is smashed over his head.”